

*Merry*

LITTLE

HEARTBREAK

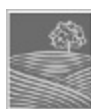
LEGACY OF THE MAGUIRES

STELLA HOLT

# MERRY LITTLE HEARTBREAK

A Legacy of the Maguires Romance

Stella Holt



TULE  
PUBLISHING

Merry Little Heartbreak

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# **Dedication**

For Brian

my favorite

Second Chance Romance.

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# Chapter One

## Margo

**D**R. MARGO MONROE was meticulously typing out new labels for each of the cupboards in the ER attending doctor's office. The space was small, with no window, and may have previously been a closet, but it was now organized. She shared it with three other attending physicians at Mercy Hospital in Alexandria, Virginia, and she liked to help them keep it tidy. Organizing was also an excuse not to walk over to the auditorium gallery.

“Dr. Monroe, you missed a fantastic presentation in the gallery on the new triage techniques for burns and treatment by the plastic surgery god from LA.” One of the eager second-year resident students on rotation in her emergency room saddled up next to Margo just as she exited the closet.

“I'm sure it was riveting but probably more applicable up in the burn unit.”

The bright-eyed doctor picked up a tablet from the charging station. “Thank you for letting me attend with the others.”

“Don't thank me. It's important for you all to be exposed to every discipline, so you can see the ER is by far the superior place to practice real medicine while serving your community.”

“Well, you missed more than just the techniques. It was clear why the doctor from LA is referred to as ‘The One.’ He was smoking hot.”

“Sara, you have too many years left of residency to get sidetracked by a pretty face, besides you know what they say about hot men with god complexes?” Margo said.

“What do they say?” a deep voice from over her shoulder asked.



Margo's arch-support black sneakers squeaked on the linoleum floor as she turned to face the man behind that voice. A voice that sent a shiver of awareness over her skin and made her heart skip a beat before it plummeted to the floor.

"Dr. Monroe, I was expecting to see you in the lecture today," the director of the hospital said.

She was standing next to the tall, gorgeous man with a deep voice. A man with midnight-black hair and dark eyes to match. He stood towering over the three women in a flawless tailored gray suit, black tie, and a playful smirk pulling at his full, lush lips.

Margo took a deep breath and squared her shoulders like she was facing a firing squad with her head held high.

"Someone needs to actually see patients in the ER, Director Kelly, even when we have world-famous lecturers," Margo said, not trying to hide her distaste with the insinuation that she was slacking.

"Our guest, Dr. Maguire, asked to see the triage space for burn victims so he can consult on which upgrades can be made. He's going to be consulting with the plastic surgery department for the week and needs to know the process a burn victim goes through upon intake."

Margo's stomach did a dive, and her heart fluttered in her chest.

"Dr. Monroe, it's lovely to see you again," Dr. Maguire said, holding out his hand toward her.

She forced herself not to flinch when she took his strong, warm hand that enveloped hers. He held her hand for a few seconds longer than necessary. Long enough for her to notice how soft and strong his hand was at the same time.

“Dr. Maguire, welcome to Mercy where chaos reigns,” she said, not knowing at all what to say.

“Yes, obviously, we have one of the busiest trauma units and emergency rooms in the tri-state area,” the director blathered.

“I read you see over one hundred thousand burn victims a year.” His eyes didn’t leave Margo’s.

“Dr. Maguire, your presentation in the gallery was exceptional. There was a rumor you’ll be joining the plastic surgery department tomorrow for a demonstration on your techniques.” Sara exuded awe.

Drake was still staring at Margo as if he was trying to make sure she was really the same girl he’d left behind twelve years ago. Then he finally stopped staring, and his face lit up with an authentic smile that highlighted his carved jaw, covered in a five-o’clock shadow she wanted to reach out and touch.

“Yes, I’ll be consulting on possible improvements in the plastics department and participating in an exciting procedure tomorrow.”

Before Sara could swoon over Drake, the trauma alarm went off, and the head nurse called out, “Shooting victims, five.” Margo was off like an Olympic runner. Eight years of daily trauma training, and she couldn’t have stood still if she’d wanted to. Her first stop was to wash her hands in the utility sink nearby next to another resident.

“Dr. Monroe, the tour of the triage area?” the director called.

“No time, but you’re both free to watch how we handle multiple gunshot victims. There will be burn marks from the shots if they were in close quarters.” She finished washing her hands and grabbed gloves. “There’s at least a fifty-fifty chance.”

She let her eyes run up and down Drake's form, his hands pushed into his pockets as if he were on a tour of the zoo, but she could see the tension in his shoulders. "Stick around and you can help us sew up the victims, but you might want to put on some scrubs. Nothing nice ever makes it through a shift at Mercy."

Drake nodded with a knowing smile. "I'm already scheduled for another procedure in plastics, but hopefully we'll get a chance to work together soon. There's something we need to discuss."

Then the paramedics with gurneys were pouring in from the ambulance bay, and she was too busy for the next two hours to worry about how long the director or Drake stuck around. But if she were honest, she'd known the minute he left because her heart stopped racing, and the hairs on the back of her neck went down. All these years, and he still had the allure to make her entire body respond. He'd only gotten more confident and gorgeous with time.

Over ten years felt like ten minutes. And he looked even better in person than in the medical journals she always looked for him in.

# Chapter Two

## Margo

**T**HE INCANDESCENT CRYSTAL chandeliers glimmered above, and white Christmas trees framed the plush, red carpeted stairs that lead up to the grand ballroom in DC's fanciest hotel. It was only November, but they were already dazzling guests with a wintery wonderland of epic proportions.

"Oh my word," Margo squealed. "This is like my holiday dream coming to life." She squeezed her colleague's arm as her eyes darted around the entrance to the ballroom to take in all the glamor. Lights and music cascaded out from the towering gold encrusted doorway, beckoning her.

"Why don't you go inside while I check our coats? I feel like you might need a few minutes just to take it all in," Dr. Dalton Hart said, stepping behind her to take her winter trench.

"You are the best wingman ever," she gushed.

"Obviously," he said before getting in the long coat line.

Margo walked toward the glow of the dazzling room. Huge ice sculptures and spindly, glass white-and-silver trees lined the path that led up to a clear dance floor that lit up wherever people stepped. A band in all white played classic Christmas tunes. Guests were dressed in formalwear, and normally Margo would feel completely out of place, but tonight she looked the part in her midnight-blue velvet gown. The material hugged her curves, her long dark hair hung in big fat curls instead of her usual braid, and she wore deep red lipstick. A far cry from her usual mint-green scrubs issued to all physicians at Mercy Hospital.

Tonight was the first time she agreed to attend the event that kicked off the hospital's holiday blitz of donor events. Every attending doctor who wasn't working was expected to help recruit sizable donations. Excitement was in the air, or maybe it was just her and the glee of being dressed up and having the night off. As one of four attending doctors for the emergency department, she rarely had time for much outside of work.

Her best friend and another attending doctor, Dalton, had convinced her to go with him to make some connections. It was the goal of the hospital for the doctors to schmooze the rich donors and garner more donations for the hospital, but Margo had another cause. Her contract with Mercy ended this summer, and she either needed a new contract or a new job.

Lately, she'd felt the fatigue of practicing ER medicine and serving as the manager of all the department's residents. As much as she enjoyed teaching, it took away from her time with patients. She was torn but needed a plan for what she wanted to do next before she signed another contract. These events were the best way to get time with board members and senior administrators at the hospital to discuss opportunities.

Although Dalton was gorgeous with a ripped former-Navy SEAL physique, icy-blue eyes, and a killer smile, he was like a brother she never had. But tonight, his broad shoulders and a great sense of humor were going to work to her advantage.

Everyone liked Dalton, and his charisma was the buffer she needed to attempt to make some overdue connections. Margo found it difficult to be charming on demand, like being a show pony and convincing people she could jump. But it was a necessary element working in a top-tier hospital and when looking for her next job. Glitzy parties were not a part of her world.

Although she was a doctor in a prestigious hospital, she still had student loans to pay off.

Taking a deep breath, she scanned the room, not wanting to go too far and lose Dalton. It was sort of sad that the only date she had was a man she saw every day because they worked overlapping shifts. He was effectively her work husband. At thirty-three, she may have missed her window for the kind of happily ever after she'd planned on, but her work required deep dedication. The hours were long, and the work was not for the faint of heart. She saw the worst of humanity daily in the ER.

"This is a pretty impressive party," Dalton said as he handed her a coat check ticket and stuck out his elbow for her to take.

"Where do we even start?"

"I thought I'd find you standing in line to see Santa," he said, guiding her into the crowd.

"Very funny. Wait, is he really here?" she asked, looking around, searching the expansive space.

Dalton laughed. "No, but I heard there is a vodka tasting room," he said, pointing to the corner where a faux igloo jutted out from the wall.

Margo laughed. "No way. If we go in there, we'll be too hungover for work tomorrow."

"First rule of donor events is, nurse your drink until the donors leave, or they get too drunk to remember us breaking it down on the dance floor."

"Deal," she said, as they began to make their way farther into the room.

Just as they rounded a cluster of life-size snow globes, her smile faltered, and she gripped Dalton's arm. Standing at the bar was the one man who

could ruin this night for her, the one man she hoped not to see again.

Before she could course correct, his black onyx eyes landed on her and his mouth formed a faint smile, but it fell away when his eyes shifted to Dalton. She couldn't tell Dalton to do an about-face; he was already making a beeline to the bar where Drake stood.

"Just go with everything I say, okay?" she whisper-yelled to Dalton over the loud music.

"Uh okay, drama," he teased as they continued their path until they were standing right in front of Drake, who was chatting with several of the nurses from her emergency department.

"Good evening, Dr. Monroe, Dr. Dalton. Isn't this ice palace fantastic?" one of the women they worked with every day said and moved closer to Drake.

He wore a tailored black suit that must have been fitted by someone who enjoyed torturing her, because it showed off his tall, lean but muscular form to perfection. His square jaw, thick dark hair, and those attentive eyes were all putting her in a trance. She felt mute. She didn't want to tell her colleagues he was her ex-boyfriend, and she didn't want to come across as scared. Even though she was because after seeing him again, it was painfully clear she still had feelings for him, and it wasn't hate.

"Hello again, Margo," Drake said.

His deep baritone voice made her belly thrum.

"Drake, how odd to see you at a Mercy donor event."

Dalton started to speak, but she cut him off and pulled him closer to her. "This is Dalton, my date."

She didn't miss several of the nurses' eyebrows shoot up, but she kept a straight face.

An amused smile spread on Drake's face as he held out his hand to Dalton.

"Drake Maguire, and this is Sierra, Clare, and Jenna." Drake supplied all the women's names. "But then you probably all know each other."

"Dalton Hart, happy holidays," he said with an affable smile. "Good evening, ladies."

"Good evening, Dr. Hart," the women said in unison, giving Dalton the same eyelash-fluttering, flirty smiles they always did.

She fought the need to roll her eyes and instead pressed her body against Dalton's arm. The women looked doubtfully at her, probably because they knew she was lying about Dalton being her date. But Drake didn't need to know that.

"Why are you here?" Margo asked Drake, unable to resist.

"I think the head of Mercy's plastic surgery department is hoping to recruit me," Drake said.

Margo nodded, while stifling the desire to scream. It was bad enough that he was consulting on some cases in the plastic surgery department of her hospital, but if they managed to convince him to stay at Mercy, she would have to find a new hospital. There was no way she could work with him. After twelve years, the acute pain of losing him was like a monsoon covering her and soaking her in regrets all over again.

"You're the Drake Maguire from LA, 'The One' Da Vinci of plastic surgery? Isn't that what they call you?" Dalton said.



But Drake's eyes didn't leave hers. "A silly nickname from the only interview I've ever done. Yet it seems to follow me everywhere. Everything in Hollywood gets a tagline."

"It does take an artist to make plastic surgery look flawless," Nurse Clare said, looking at Drake with awe.

Like hungry lions feeding, the women moved closer to him, ready to sink their paws in him, and Margo had to look away. She couldn't watch the fawning attention they showered over Drake when she still thought of him as hers. Of course, he was drop-dead gorgeous with his brooding eyes and a handsome face that looked carved from a perfect stone, like a god sent to tempt women to fall for him.

"Let's get a drink in the vodka den," Margo said, pulling Dalton in the opposite direction where the igloo sat sparkling.

Dalton's keen eyes fell on her with a subtle question, as if he could tell she had a history with Drake. But his Prince Charming smile was in place.

"Enjoy your evening," he said.

The nurses were already ignoring them, asking Drake questions about his work in plastic surgery. He gave her another hard look while a frown tugged at his perfect mouth. But Dalton guided them away, toward the igloo.

She squeezed Dalton's arm in annoyance.

"Is he an old friend of yours?" Dalton asked.

"Something like that. I'm sorry I said you were my date, but it's just weird seeing him after all this time."

"No problem, but I have a feeling he didn't buy it," Dalton said as they stopped behind another couple already in line for the fur coats everyone had

to put on before they entered the ice cube dome structure.

Unable to resist, she glanced over her shoulder to find Drake watching her even as the beautiful blonde nurse whispered something in his ear. Years of ignoring him, and you'd think she'd be over it by now. Some people just got under your skin and stayed there, and Drake Maguire was hers. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard if he wasn't so successful and even more gorgeous now. But people broke up every day. You were more likely not to end up with your first love than live happily ever after. He'd moved on, and she had no choice but to move on too. It wasn't even worth worrying about it. He was part of her past, and in a few weeks, he would be gone for good again.

Two hours later, Margo had a buzz and let loose for the first time in years. Dalton had handled most of the schmoozing, but she'd met all the department heads and major donors. Instead of focusing on asking about new opportunities for her outside of the ER, she found herself looking for the dark-haired man from her past throughout the night. She caught glimpses of him once or twice, but only in passing, and he didn't seem to notice her again. Dalton had played his part as wingman and faux boyfriend to perfection, spinning her around the dance floor all night and distracting her.

After checking her phone for any messages from the hospital, she was on her way back into the ballroom when she heard a familiar voice.

"That's a great dress. It leaves zero need for the imagination," Drake said, moving off the wall where he had been leaning.

"Drake, I didn't see you there," Margo said, trying to disguise the surprise of finding him waiting for her.

But then, a woman she didn't recognize stumbled out of the ballroom and wobbled right into Drake's arms.

“Oh, good thing you’re right where I need you to catch me,” she said in a sultry voice.

With his hands on her shoulders, he steadied her.

“Why don’t you get your coat, and I’ll meet you in the lobby,” he said.

The woman let her hand skim down his chest and used his body to steady herself on her feet. “Don’t be long,” she said, ignoring Margo and walking off.

“Not exactly your type,” Margo said, unable to resist.

Drake narrowed his dark eyes, his thick lashes turning his stern look into a sexy smolder.

“I’m going to help her into a taxi before I head up to my room. You’re welcome to come up and check for yourself if you like,” he replied.

She thought he would walk away, but instead, he closed the space between them with a step in her direction. She backed up, only to collide with the narrow wall of the hall.

“A coworker doesn’t exactly seem like your type,” he challenged.

He knew she’d lied about Dalton being her date. She could tell by the playful smile and suspected the nurses probably ratted her out.

“I guess people change,” she said.

“Or maybe people never change,” he said, brushing away a strand of her dark hair that fell forward from the swoopy side part she styled earlier. “Maybe we’re all just looking for something we can’t recognize we already have,” Drake said.

A gasp escaped her mouth, and she was forced to watch with expectation as he took another step, eliminating any space between them. He was a mere

breath away with one hand on the wall above her. She could duck under his arm, but she wanted to see what happened next.

“It’s too bad you have a date here,” he said, taunting her, his free hand lifted to her cheek where his thumb gently ran the length of her jaw.

Unable to resist his nearness, she reached up and gripped his black silk tie to bring him near. His lips were so close she could feel his breath on her cheek, his familiar scent mixed with spice invading her senses. Then his mouth was on hers, and she pressed up on her tiptoes to get closer. He bit down on her lower lip before she opened her mouth to him. His tongue plunged in to meet hers as if he knew exactly how to kiss her, which he did.

The sound of laughter and people approaching brought her to her senses, and she pushed him away.

“Why did you do that?” she said, wiping at her swollen lips.

“To prove my point,” he said, before wiping her red lipstick off his mouth.

Emotion swelled into her throat as the foyer outside the ballroom began to fill with people departing the event. They were surrounded by her colleagues, and she couldn’t fall apart or question him or she might burst into tears.

“Goodbye, Drake,” she said.

“Goodbye, for tonight,” he said, not moving as she skirted away from him.

She would need another dozen years before she saw him again because one kiss had thrown her right back into the sadness of losing him. But it was mixed with all the regret that she’d made the wrong decision all those years ago. Maybe she should have followed him to UCLA and taken a year or two

off to save up so she could afford to attend the same medical program. Maybe they would still be together. But that was a useless game of what-if to play. They'd both made their choice.

# Chapter Three

## Drake

**H**E WAS EXHAUSTED. Between the travel from LA, two days of lectures, meeting with the board at Mercy Hospital, the gala the night before, and a five-hour surgery under observation of the other plastic surgeons and resident students, he was spent. But there was a nagging desire to go down to the emergency room and see Margo again. He had a few more days in town consulting at Mercy before Thanksgiving with his family. There would probably be several opportunities to see her again. But for some reason, there was an urgency to see her now, and as much as possible. Even though he knew by Christmas he'd be back in LA. Too far from her, but that was the decision he made years ago. Then why was he on the elevator on his way to the ER with no idea what he was going to say?

He only made it a few feet before the residents that had been attending his lectures noticed him and glommed on.

“Dr. Maguire, any chance you would like to join us for a drink after our shift?” a young man that he remembered from both his lectures asked.

“I’m afraid I have dinner plans with my family that live near here, and if I don’t see my aunt and uncle, there will be hell to pay.”

He laughed. “Well, the world needs your talents, so you better make that dinner.”

“Could you direct me toward Dr. Monroe’s office?”

The young doctor laughed again. “Sure, but she won’t be in there. She’s over in the bay with the patients, always teaching us something.”

“Hopefully, you’re paying attention because she’s a brilliant doctor.”

“Yes, sir.”

He spotted Margo before she noticed him, and sure enough, she was talking with an elderly patient while several residents watched and nodded. He hung back and waited for her to be done. It gave him the perfect chance to study her, like seeing a beautiful intricate painting from a new angle, always something new to entice him to stare. His muse was too astute, and she noticed him before long.

“Dr. Maguire, two visits to the ER in two days? Are you thinking about a change in your medical discipline?” she asked.

“If you’ll be my teacher, I could be convinced,” he said honestly.

The handful of residents’ heads bounced back and forth between them.

“Get Mrs. Baker a snack while you wait for her family to pick her up,” Margo said to the residents. “I’ll be right back.”

Walking past him, she made it clear he should follow, but he didn’t need any encouragement. She was like the flame, and he was the moth.

“What can I help you with, Dr. Maguire?” She took a deep breath before squaring her shoulders. As if she was getting ready for a fight.

“I thought if your shift was almost over, we could get dinner together.”

“No.”

“No, your shift isn’t almost over, or no, you don’t want to get dinner?”

“Both.”

“Then I guess show me the burn triage area so I can make myself useful until your shift is over?”

“Fine, but it won’t take you very long to assess it, and I’m not going to dinner with you when my shift is over.”

Before he could respond, the same trauma buzzer that sounded the day before went off again. This time it was louder, and Margo's demeanor completely changed. A brief sign of panic was quickly replaced by determination. All the residents appeared out of nowhere like soldiers.

"All right, doctors. This is not a drill. Get suited up, wash your hands, and get ready. We have multiple traumas, and triage will be run by me or Dr. Hart. You will do exactly what you're told by us and the head nurse. Am I clear?" Her voice rang loud through the bay of half-filled beds.

The doctors all hustled to do as they were told, and a half-dozen nurses, along with Dr. Hart appeared.

"Apartment blaze, ten people on their way here, and they are sending the others to Memorial in the city," Dr. Hart said.

"Nurse Steph, will you please man the communications and give us updates? We need to condense the current patients to one corner of the bay and shield them as much as we can from the incoming chaos."

"Yes, Doctor," the tall woman said with unflinching respect for Margo's leadership.

"You scrubbing in, Drake? From what I hear, you're a decent surgeon," Dalton said, with his hands on his hips and a friendly smile.

"I'd like to," Drake said, moving toward the sink.

"You can't just practice ER medicine in between lectures for funsies," Margo said.

"No, but I'm currently covered by Mercy insurance for the surgery I participated in today, and I do a fair amount of pro bono trauma work at a clinic in LA. I think you'll find I'm not completely useless."



Dalton looked at Margo with a nod.

“Fine, but the same rules apply. You take triage orders from Dalton, me, and head nurses. No job is too small.”

“Yes, boss.”

He couldn't help but feel exhilarated and anxious to work with her. But when the injured and wounded began to pour in, along with several badly burned firemen, the excitement vanished. He did whatever was asked of him, cleaned wounds, stitched people, comforted people, and assisted with the burns. He not only saw the limited burn triage area but used the insufficient space for multiple patients. They received a total of twenty-eight patients within an hour, and Margo remained focused. He watched her serve as the calm in the storm for the residents and the patients.

“She's a force, probably the toughest and most precise medic I've ever worked with,” Dalton said, catching Drake watching Margo. She was resetting a broken bone from a patient that jumped out of the building when the fire got too close to their apartment.

“How long have you worked with Margo?” Drake asked.

“Three years,” Dalton said.

Drake didn't ask how long they had dated because he was fairly certain that had been a lie. Also, he liked Dalton and didn't want to think he'd crossed a line by kissing Margo. Somewhere in his mind, she was still his to kiss, and he'd let his memories get the best of him. He shouldn't have kissed her, but he didn't regret it.

“Hart, incoming three more level fours,” Nurse Steph yelled from across the bay, and the sirens sounded closer and closer.

He watched as Dalton removed his gloves and grabbed new ones before heading to the ambulance bay.

How could Margo work under this constant pressure and not feel like a god, or a warrior like Dr. Hart or both? It must be taking its toll after years of residency then leading a shift. Did she regret not going with him out to LA? And if she had gone, would they still be together? More importantly, what if he had returned to Virginia instead of working as the protégé of one of the most successful plastic surgeons in LA?

Three hours later, there was finally a slight lull in the tempo of activity in the ER. Drake chugged a Gatorade one of the residents had handed him and searched for Margo. She'd gone behind a curtain about a half hour ago in a surgery bay within the ER for the most serious cases. A young woman had been brought in, unconscious, no burns but likely smoke inhalation. Just then, she popped out from the curtain and pulled off her mask as she moved swiftly away from the curtained-off area. He could see the pain on her face, and he followed her down the hall, beyond the doctor's lounge. She stopped, facing the wall. Leaning forward, took a few deep breaths and rested her head against the wall.

She was fighting the fatigue and emotions built up over the last three hours of leading her team and saving lives.

He didn't want to say the wrong thing, but he had an urge to hold her.

"You're an exceptional doctor, Margo."

She stiffened but didn't open her eyes or face him.

"Maybe, but not even that is enough some days."

"You may have lost the patient, but it wasn't for not trying."

He moved closer and lightly lay his hand on her shoulder. She didn't immediately shirk his touch, so he moved his hand over her back. In firm back-and-forth motions, he felt the flex of her back muscles ease. He stood close enough to see her take a few more breaths. Before she shut down on him, and looked up.

"You didn't have to stay. Thank you for helping the team. That was way too many cases."

"You don't have to thank me. When does your shift end?"

She looked at her watch. "Now-ish, but I'll have mounds of paperwork and have to stay on another hour or two to help with the regular patients we held in the waiting room."

"I'll stay and help."

"No, if the director finds out I kept you here late when you probably have donor dinners or lectures to give, she'll have my head."

"Dr. Monroe, they say there are more patients coming, the second wave," one of the nurses called down the hall.

"Duty calls. You should go while the getting is good."

His exhaustion was rolling in like waves, and yet he would stay if she asked him to. Maybe she was ready for him to go, but he wanted to stay.

"I'll go, but I'm in town for a few more days and I plan to see you again before I leave."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure, but why not?"

"There are too many reasons to list, and neither of us have the time."

The sirens wailed again, and she pushed off the wall to walk back into the fray. He said good night to several of the residents, and Dalton nodded as he ran to meet the next wave of less critical patients that were being sent to Mercy. Drake retrieved his coat and things from the doctor's lounge in the almost-empty plastic surgery suite before heading back to his hotel. He was definitely going to see Margo again. There was nothing that was going to keep him away.

# Chapter Four

## Drake

**D**RAKE ALWAYS KNEW his extended family was over the top, but it was never more obvious than this moment as he sat at the annual Maguire Thanksgiving Eve party at his aunt and uncle's house. All his cousins were either married or about to be. Even his badass SEAL team legend of a cousin, Finn, was all gaga over his new girlfriend. Granted, she was beautiful, but still. Drake was nowhere near settling down, and it seemed more out of reach when he was surrounded by so many couples. None of his family had arrived yet. His parents were late, and his brother was once again not answering his calls.

"Are you really a rolling stone?" a little squeaky voice asked over his right shoulder, pulling his attention away from the fire pit in front of him.

"Yes," he admitted.

"What does that mean? Cuz you don't look like a stone to me," the little brunette with a mop of curls said, stepping out of the shadow. She stood all of three feet high with her two front teeth missing and looked just like his cousin Charlotte.

"No, but he looks scary in all black by the fire," quipped a little boy with matching curls trimmed into a faux mohawk.

"Hey, you two leave cousin Drake alone. He's just grumpy by nature," Finn said, giving the kids more sparklers and sending them off.

"Thanks, I think," Drake grumbled.

Finn smirked. "I can't have you scaring the kids. Charlotte would not approve."

"What's with the goofy grin?" Drake countered.

“Just happy, I guess. What’s with the scowl?”

“Been a long year.”

“That must mean business is good. So what’s the problem?” Finn said.

Drake huffed. “I’m not sure, but I think I hate my job.”

Finn made a low whistle. “I thought you loved being a doctor? Making surgery art and healing people. It fits your god complex.”

“Plastic surgery doesn’t feel like real medicine unless I’m doing pro bono work, and that can be really sad. Burn victims and scars from terrible experiences.”

“Then do something else. Your genius-level brain can come up with a new plan. Maybe get back to basics?”

Drake scoffed. “I’ve been lecturing at Mercy this week. They’re trying to convince me to transfer from LA to their plastics center.”

“But you’d rather do something else, practice different medicine?”

“Maybe, but I’d have to start over in the rotations, like a resident, at any hospital if I change my discipline.”

“Maybe a new challenge is what you need, and it’d be the perfect time to come back to Virginia. Just imagine all those newbie doctors forced to learn next to our own plastic surgery god.” Finn laughed.

“More like the devil,” his cousin Connor said, sitting down in an empty seat next to Finn. “Drake, would it kill you to smile and wear something other than black all the time?”

“Maybe,” Drake replied.

He practically grew up with his cousins on his dad’s side. They spent summers together and dozens of holiday parties, wrestling, shooting hoops,

or swimming at the lake, where every family had a lake house. Finn and Conner's family were always the cheery household with the mushy parents who genuinely adored each other and their kids. His parents were more obsessed with good grades, knowing the right people, and getting him and his brother into the right school. In many ways, he was as close to his cousins—if not more so—than his own family.

“Drake's considering a career change,” Finn said, filling Conner in on their conversation. “I'm trying to convince him to come back to Virginia.”

“Do it. You've been miserable. Why don't you go into pediatrics? You'd probably be good with all those cute babies.”

“Never,” Drake said.

“Orthopedics.”

“Boring.”

“Brain surgery.”

“Tools are too delicate.” Drake held up his massive hands.

“Plastic surgery. Your logo can be, *Get done by the god*,” Conner said.

“That's what I do, idiot.”

“Oh yeah, that's lame. Emergency is where it's at: broken bones, life-and-death injuries. Those doctors are high-speed adrenaline junkies. You could move back and get away from all those fake people in LA,” Connor said.

Drake nodded. “Yeah, but you know who else works in emergency at Mercy?”

Finn piped up, “My teammate works in emergency, but who else?”

“Miss Margo Monroe,” Drake said.

“Damn. Well, you could go to a different hospital,” Finn said.

“Or you could settle that score with her,” Conner said.

Drake forced a smile, even though just saying her name made his stomach twist into knots. He wasn’t about to admit he’d kissed her at the event the night before. It was best if he stayed far away from Margo. Even now, the memory had his heart pounding, and his interest flared.

“Did someone say Margo Monroe?” Hannah said as she settled on Connor’s lap.

Drake groaned.

“Yes, dearest.” Conner pretended to spit off to the side. “But we don’t say that name.”

“Why not? Margo is fantastic. I saw her save a kid’s life this week—”  
Drake groaned.

“Did I say something wrong?” she asked.

Finn laughed, and Connor kissed her nose.

“No, my cousin just has some unfinished business with Margo,” Conner said.

“Well, he looks annoyed, so maybe you should change the subject.”

“Probably for the best,” Drake said.

Connor took a sip of his beer while he held his hand up, counting down on his fingers.

“What unfinished business?” Hannah asked.

“I’m glad you asked, babe. Once upon a time, Drake and Margo dated.”

“They did?” Interest was written all over her face.



“Yep,” Finn replied.

“What happened?”

“They were high school sweethearts, then dated for four years while attending George Mason, and both got into the same medical school across the country in California.”

“Wow.” Hannah’s eyes looked sad. “But there was no happy ending?”

“Nope, Margo broke Drake’s heart when she dumped him and went to school here instead of going with him to Cali.”

“There must be more to it than that,” she said, squinting her eyes on Drake. “Did you cheat?”

“No. I was beyond obsessed with Margo. She just had a change of heart, said it was too far from home, and stayed here.”

“Holy smokes,” Hannah said.

“It gets worse,” Conner said.

“Is that even possible?” she asked.

“A few years ago, Drake heard she was spending time with his brother Ian,” Conner said.

“No way.” She gasped. “That doesn’t sound like something Margo would do,” Hannah said.

“Thank you for letting me relive that highlight reel, Conner,” Drake said.

“No problem, man.”

“The point is, we were just encouraging Drake to move back and work in the emergency department at Mercy, since he’s bored with plastics,” Finn said.

“But wouldn’t he have to work with Margo?” Hannah asked.

“Yes. It would be like fire and ice, oil and water, Cain and Abel.” Connor clapped his hands together. “Magic.”

A smile spread across Finn’s face before he and Connor both started belly laughing while Hannah studied Drake.

“You know what they say: there’s a thin line between love and hate,” she said.

“Well, in their case, it’s razor thin, and one of them is bound to get cut and bleed out,” Connor said.

“There must still be something there if she can get under his skin after all this time,” Finn added.

Drake stood and turned away from them, shaking his head. He didn’t want to listen anymore.

Moving back was not in the plans. And yet the idea of getting out of the fake world of plastic surgery in LA was appealing. Maybe there was more unfinished business between Margo and him than he realized, because that kiss had not been one-sided. His brain almost couldn’t comprehend how responsive she’d been. Didn’t he owe it to himself to find out why?

The next day, on Thanksgiving, Drake realized he had stayed away from home too long. When he arrived at his parents’ home in the same gated community he’d grown up in, he found his father in his office working. There were no traditional smells of the holiday, no gravy, or pies cooking, and the house was quiet.

Sitting in one of the familiar leather chairs in front of his dad’s desk a knot settled in his stomach.

“Where’s Mom and Ian? Aren’t we having a family dinner in a few hours?”

His father sighed as he sat back in his high-backed chair. Removing his glasses, he squeezed his eyes shut before the deep blue depths looked up. Something was wrong.

“Happy Thanksgiving, son. Your mother had a procedure last week and has been feeling sick so we decided to just order in this year. Your brother had some excuse not to join us, and to be honest, we weren’t sure you’d show.”

“The only thing open will be Chinese food. Are you sure you don’t want to try to make something?”

“No, it’s too late to start now.”

“What do you mean a procedure? What did Mom have done? She does know I’m a plastic surgeon, right? After trying to talk her out of whatever work she convinced herself she needed, I could have recommended a great doctor.”

His dad cleared his throat but didn’t speak. A man that always had the answers was quiet, and he looked worried.

“Dad?”

“It wasn’t that kind of a procedure.” His dad pounded his fist on the desk. “I told her we should tell you, but she didn’t want to worry you boys. You know once that woman makes up her mind, it’s impossible to argue with her.”

“What kind of procedure was it, Dad?” A sense of forbidding mixed with panic.

“They found a lump a few months ago. She had it removed right away, and they said she’d only need one round of chemo. Which turned into two rounds. She just finished with the second, and it’s taking a toll. Now we’ll have to wait and see if it worked.”

He would have been furious if his dad didn’t look so devastated.

“No one in the family knows? That’s why neither of you were there last night?”

“No, the effects of the medicine didn’t start to show until after the first round. But now she is fatigued and losing hair.”

Drake stood and began to pace. “Start from the beginning and tell me everything, please. Then I’d like to see her file.”

Two hours later, Drake sat next to his mother’s bed where she slept. Her skin had the sheen of sickness, there were dark circles under eyes, and her face was pale and puffy. He spent the holiday right there waiting for her to need something. When she finally woke up, he was too worried to be upset with her for not telling him.

“You’re a good son,” she said, patting his hand. “But you’re busy in LA, and I didn’t want to worry you. I really thought I’d be in and out, one round of treatment, and it’d be gone. But it turned into more.”

“Does Ian know?”

She sighed. “No, though I knew I would have to tell him once this second round of chemo started to make me look and feel so sick. But he’s been swamped at work.”

“You should have told us,” Drake said.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to. The doctors said this was fairly routine and even Margo said all the literature shows a high rate of recovery.”

“Margo? Margo Monroe knew you were getting treatment? You told my ex-girlfriend, and you didn’t tell either of your children?”

“I’ve kept in touch with Margo for years, but I hadn’t planned on telling her until we ran into each other at the hospital. Then it was nice to have someone to talk to about everything with, woman to woman. She’s been supportive of me in a way I don’t have to worry about her feelings, I can be vulnerable with her. When I told your father he was devastated.”

“I see.” He pushed down his annoyance, having learned about the difficulty many women experience when dealing with breast cancer. Family wanted to be helpful but it sometimes added another layer of worry for the patient. “But, Mom, I’m a physician too.”

“You live in a different time zone and couldn’t leave work to fly out for every appointment. When I ran into Margo, I didn’t expect her to become such a huge support, but it’s been nice to complain to someone that doesn’t look at me like you are now. All worry and guilt.”

Drake ran his hands over his face and took a deep breath.

“Okay, but I am staying in town indefinitely, and I would like to be here for you if you need or want me. And I think you should tell Ian, or I will. He deserves to know.”

His mom sighed. “Are you sure you can take that much time off work? What about your patients?”

“You’re my mom. Let me worry about that.”

“All right, you can tell your brother, if it’ll get you two talking again. I’m just going to take a little bit longer nap,” she said, tucking back into her

covers, and her eyes drifted closed.

After stepping into the hall, he called and texted his brother a dozen times until he phoned him back. Then Drake told Ian over the phone the same shit news: their mom had breast cancer. It looked like it was caught in time, but she wasn't out of danger yet.

"I guess we'll be having a family reunion, unless you're just telling me before you bail again," Ian said over the phone.

It was noisy wherever he was, and there were constant announcements being made over a loudspeaker.

"Going away to medical school doesn't count as bailing."

"That depends on the person's perspective, and you didn't have to stay gone for ten years," Ian said.

"Where are you? Why wouldn't you be with Mom and Dad for Thanksgiving?"

"Oh, that's rich. You come home for two holidays in a decade, and you're lecturing me?"

"I just mean you live in the same state, same town as Mom and Dad, and you're not home for Thanksgiving?"

"I had a work commitment, and my flight got delayed or I would have been there. I'm on my way back now, but I won't land in DC until midnight. I'll see Mom first thing in the morning. So you can run back to LA."

"I'm not leaving now," Drake said.

"We'll see," Ian said and then hung up.

If Drake didn't know better, he would say his brother resented him for leaving and making a life far away from home. But the truth was, he didn't

have a life in LA. He just had a job. A job he wasn't passionate about anymore, and a job he could do anywhere.

# Chapter Five

## Margo

**M**ARGO HAD SPENT the day after Thanksgiving off to spend with her family and catch up on sleep, but now she was headed back into the ER. The streets in Alexandria were recently decorated with holiday wreaths on the light poles and twinkling lights over storefronts, as if Santa's helpers spent the night decorating for Christmas. It was her favorite time of the year because it always felt like there was a chance for holiday magic.

She'd been relieved and disappointed she didn't see Drake again before her day off, but it was for the best, for her heart. He'd been more flirtatious than she would have expected from someone that left her behind. Seeing him again distracted her and proved some wounds didn't really heal with time. Even twelve years hadn't helped her get over him. But she needed to forget about Drake, focus on her work, and figure out what she was going to do next. After every day off, it seemed tougher and tougher to come back to work. She loved being a doctor, but the ten- to twelve-hour shifts, intense pace, and often heartbreaking cases had taken their toll on her.

As she walked through the ambulance bay, out of the cold, she smiled at the familiar paramedics and made her way to the doctor's lounge. She was early for her shift and brought fresh roasted espresso beans as a treat for the other doctors. Once the aroma filled the air, she poured herself a cup, added a healthy splash of candy-cane-flavored creamer, and she had a perfect morning coffee loaded in her favorite festive mug. She even managed to wear fresh, unwrinkled scrubs.

She had been notified via email there was a new fifth-year resident joining the emergency department today, and it was her job, along with



Dalton, to get them trained up for possible selection as a permanent physician to join the team. She was motivated more than ever to select highly skilled doctors now that the idea to try something new had taken root in her mind. If she did leave the ER, she would want to feel like she was leaving it in great hands.

“It’s going to be a great day,” she whispered to herself, standing in the doctor’s lounge blowing on her hot cup. She let her shoulders sag as she inhaled the sweet, rich, aroma.

“Dr. Monroe, may I have a word?” a familiar, smooth, baritone voice said from over her shoulder before she could take her first sip. She set the cup down on the counter, and spun around.

Like a dream, he stood with his dark, thick hair mussed just enough to look stylishly disheveled. His black eyes revealed nothing, and his lush lips were pursed in a tight line. The faint cleft in his chin only made him look more like Prince Charming than the real fictional character.

“Drake?”

“I just wanted to say before we started that I appreciate you being willing to work with me in the emergency department. It’s very professional of you,” he said, with no hint of humor. “And I’m not mad at you for not telling me about my mom’s illness when I was in LA. But you could have said something since I saw you this week.”

Her shoulders stiffened, her breath caught in her throat, and she noticed he was wearing the mint-green scrubs with the Mercy insignia on them. This could not be happening.

“What do you mean working in the emergency department?” she croaked.

He crossed his arms. “They didn’t tell you yet?” There was a hint of mischief in his brooding eyes.

“They didn’t tell me what? I was told I have a new fifth year with extensive experience joining the team today.” She trailed off.

“That would be me, your new resident.”

“Why? You live in LA. You’re a plastic surgeon.”

“I’ve been considering a new challenge, and I need to stick around for a bit to see how my mom responds to her treatments.”

Which meant he was only planning to stick around temporarily. There was no way he would leave his lucrative and famous career in LA for good. But for now he was going to intrude on her chaotic but Drake-free emergency room.

Picking up her coffee cup, she took a huge gulp and let the piping-hot liquid burn down her throat to stifle her desire to cry. Her mind raced. Why hadn’t she asked more questions about who the last-minute addition was? Could she shirk him off on Dalton? Would she survive working every day with Drake?

“But you’re not moving back? You’re not going to take a permanent job at Mercy in the emergency department, so why put yourself through fifth year work?”

“I’m considering a change, and the director of Mercy agreed to a two-month trial split between the plastic surgery department and ER. Then I get a feel for the hospital and emergency work, see what I’m missing in LA. Mercy gets a feel for me and tries to convince me to stay on in the plastic surgery department.”

His confidence wasn't cocky but still abundant. He knew full well Mercy would benefit from having his expertise and was likely aware they always had a deficit of seasoned doctors in the ER. She wanted to ask what he was hoping to find, but she didn't dare.

“And I just wanted to be clear. I understand why you didn't call me to tell me my mom was sick, even though I wish you had.”

“Drake, you know damn well it would have been unethical for me to tell you, not to mention your mom asked me not to tell anyone.”

“Right, so I'm not mad. Actually, I appreciate you being there for her. I just wish both of you had known you could come to me.”

Words were forming in her mind, but nothing was coming out. She'd thought he'd be furious or at the very least upset when he found out that she had known and gone with his mom to several appointments. He was letting her off the hook, but why?

“Fine, so you're going to play at being a fifth year again for a few weeks. That's your call. But I think you'll find the ER in particular is governed by a strict set of rules and procedures. It gets chaotic here, and if you don't know how to do something, don't wing it.”

“Got it.”

“And there is a policy for residents. You can't date the nurses or other residents assigned to the emergency department. It always causes too much drama.”

“No problem.” He took a step farther into the empty lounge. “Just out of curiosity, what about the attendings? Can I date those?”

He was mocking her, in her own ER, on his first day. They both knew she was the only female attending, and he had rejected her years ago.

“Code blue, attending bay nine,” a message rang out over the loudspeaker.

With a sigh, she set down her coffee and moved past Drake to run toward the dying patient. Drake was on her heels but stood by while she and the nurse communicated quickly about the fifty-year-old woman in an elf suit lying still on the gurney. She was unconscious, and the paramedics rattled off details on the suspected overdose.

“Get the naloxone ready,” Margo said, climbing on the side of the gurney to start chest compressions. But the woman had no pulse.

“Paddles,” she said, and Drake was ready.

“Clear,” she said, ripping open the woman’s green costume in time for him to press the paddles to her chest and give the woman a jolt. The nurse handed Margo the syringe. Drake took the patient’s pulse as Margo administered the medicine.

“I can feel a faint pulse,” he said.

“More compressions,” Margo said, handing the syringe off to the nurse and initiating CPR again.

After a bleep on the screen, the woman wheezed and began to cough.

“You did it.” Drake’s smile was like that moment the sun woke up and cast everything in perfect light.

She hated that she could still enjoy his face after everything he’d done.

“Doctor,” the nurse said. Margo still stood over their patient—not a great place to be disoriented.

But Margo didn’t move fast enough as the woman sat up and tossed her Christmas cookies in Margo’s direction, soiling her clean scrubs before the

woman collapsed back onto the gurney.

“Yep, it’s going to be another great day in paradise,” Margo said. “Nurse Mary, meet our newest resident, Dr. Drake Maguire. He’s going to take over the patient’s vitals while I clean up.” Not bothering to look at Drake, she walked out of the intake bay and pulled the curtain to give them more privacy. The ER was buzzing with patients, nurses, and doctors—the typical hectic place.

Only twenty minutes into her shift, and it already seemed to drain her energy. Or maybe it was the reappearance of her ex-boyfriend. She needed to clean up and go speak to the director of the department and figure out a better solution for Drake’s training, if he was staying. Because there was no way she could work with him.

Back in the doctor’s lounge, she took the scrub top off and retrieved an old, frayed one off a shelf in her locker where she always kept backups. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her big eyes stared back and looked scared.

Working with Drake would be too much. It was bad enough seeing him temporarily. Over the years, she’d read countless articles about his soaring career and almost every time, there was a picture of him with some beautiful woman at a glamorous event. It was pathetic she even looked for the updates on his work in medical journals. But her work in the ER always shielded her from letting her mind wander over how things ended up between them. Today she didn’t have time to still be heartbroken. It was absurd for her to still care after all these years.

“Our patient is asking for some pain meds,” Drake said, leaning in the doorway of the lounge.

“Your patient.”

“Okay, so what do we do? She may be my patient, but this is your ER. Do you request a psych eval because she almost OD’d and put her in for a forty-eight-hour stay for observation? Or send her to a facility to get sober?”

“The reality is, no one gets clean unless they want to, but we look in the system to see if she’s a repeat offender. Call for a psych eval either way, admit her for observation, and if she doesn’t leave of her own free will, maybe she’ll decide it’s her turn to get clean and voluntarily go to rehab.”

She expected him to walk away, but instead he crossed his arms and stared at her.

“Any more questions, Doctor?”

“No.” But he didn’t move from his relaxed stance against the doorway.

“I’ll assign you a senior resident partner once I study the shifts. Did the director say which days or shifts they’d want you in plastic surgery?”

“She said I’d need to stay on the first two shifts in the ER so I could perform surgeries as needed in plastics, but between you and me, I’m hoping to minimize my time in the plastics department and made it clear I would only do nonelective surgeries.”

She was surprised because she knew the elective surgeries were generally the most lucrative.

“Okay, I’ll keep you on the first and second shift. They’re ten-hour shifts. Each shift overlaps the next about an hour for turnover and paperwork. It will be impossible for you to just dip out in the middle of a shift for surgery, so can you work with plastics to set three days with them, and then can you do two with the ER?”

“Let’s do three in the ER and plan for two in plastics.”

“Fine, and which day off would you prefer?”

“Do you give your other residents a wish list?”

Instead of schooling her annoyance, she turned with a huff.

“We’re not going to pretend you’re not already a well-established physician. Your crisis of consciousness or boredom with plastics isn’t a time machine. You can’t erase the fact that you’re a well-respected and talented plastic surgeon.”

“I don’t want special treatment.”

“And you won’t get it here, but if a burn victim comes in here with facial wounds, I expect you to use your years of training and talent to help the patient.”

“Understood.”

“For the record, yes, I do ask all my residents if they have a preference on shifts or days off because I’m not a dictator. Everyone has a life beyond this hospital, and if I can make them happy, all the better. Happier doctors are better doctors.”

She tried to move past him through the door, but he shifted his body to fully block the exit with his broad shoulders.

“Are you happy, Dr. Monroe?”

She itched to rub at the furrowed crease in his brow, but she didn’t dare. There was an invisible force field around him made of broken promises, disappointments, and her broken heart.

“That’s not really a work-related question or any of your business, Dr. Maguire.”

With a scoff, he let her walk by.

She couldn't help but notice his sweet, spicy scent. She would deny it, but it was impossible not to take a long inhale for old time's sake. There was too much history between them, and only thirty minutes into a ten-hour shift and her entire body was on high alert. Drake was like the dark clouds that filled the sky before the storm hit. His energy was palpable, and if she were honest, she couldn't stand to be so close to him, day in and day out. So she'd put him off on the second shift and let Dalton deal with him.

Drake could play god under the tutelage of another alpha male who ruled the hearts of women throughout the hospital.

Smiling to herself, she grabbed her tablet and started plotting out the staffing for the rest of the week. And on her first chance to take a break, she went to see the director of the emergency department.

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“DR. MONROE, ARE YOU here to thank me for scoring such a well-respected and highly trained physician for the ER?” Director Kelly asked.

“Actually, don't you think he's both over-qualified and lacking in experience needed in the emergency department?”

The director's proud smile fell. “No I don't, Margo. Drake Maguire graduated top of his class and has been volunteering in the local trauma clinic in LA for six years, where he has dealt with all types of emergency scenarios. Not to mention he brings years of experience from his plastic surgery pro bono work. We're lucky to have him.”

“The truth is, I don't think I would be the best doctor to oversee his work. I'm already managing five other residents and inundated with paperwork. I don't think I can take on one more basically first-year resident.”



The director scoffed. “I think this is exactly the perfect addition to your application for the new deputy director of the ER.”

“What deputy director position? That doesn’t exist,” Margo said, fighting the panic in her voice.

“Not yet, but the board recently voted to approve the selection of a new deputy director in charge of all the residents in the ER, pediatrics, and trauma units.”

“That sounds like a big job and one that includes less time with patients.”

“A big job you’re perfect for. You already manage all the residents in the ER and emergency pediatrics. You would no longer need to work ten-hour shifts, and you could expand on your love of teaching.”

“I manage the residents together with Dr. Hart, and because they were basically dumped on us.”

“Dr. Hart wants nothing to do with the business of managing residents or a hospital’s recruiting program.”

“So I’m your second choice?”

“No, you’re my first choice, but I need to make sure you’re the board’s first choice. Dr. Hart’s been practicing longer than you. His military time as a Navy SEAL and medic is tough to compete with.”

“But you don’t think he wants it.”

“I know he won’t apply. And your ability to manage new residents is well documented, but managing an experienced physician like Dr. Maguire, a peer, will demonstrate your range and breadth of ability to recruit talent.”

Margo cringed, trying to think of a rebuttal.

“Unless there is another reason you don’t want to work with Dr. Maguire?”

“How do you know I’m even interested in the deputy director position? Maybe I’d rather someone else take over the residents and get back to basics.”

The director leaned forward and held Margo’s gaze. “Because I, too, started in the ER, and you look how I felt when it was time to move on. Margo, you are an excellent advocate for this hospital. The residents love you, and I think you love teaching them. I also think we will work well together, so you’re my top choice.”

“You’re recruiting me?”

“Yes.”

“If you’re saying my application for the selection of deputy director is contingent on my demonstrating further range of supervisory abilities, wouldn’t it be more prudent for me to take on the trauma residents?”

“I am saying I need you to help me convince him to stay at Mercy. Dr. Maguire is here on a temporary two-month hiatus from his practice in LA. He needs to be trained and convinced to stay at Mercy, and we’re depending on you to do it.”

“We, as in you and the board?”

“Correct. Even if you don’t want to apply for the deputy director position, we’re relying on you to recruit Dr. Maguire. It will help bolster your resume and give you more sway when negotiating your next contract with Mercy.”

Her hands shook. She had no choice either way. She still owed Mercy six more months on her current contract, and if she wanted this new position, or any job, she had to not only manage Drake but convince him to stay at

Mercy. She needed to suck it up. Even if it meant working with the one man that could drive her crazy.

“Are we clear?” the director asked.

“Yes, ma’am. If Dr. Maguire can be convinced to love working at Mercy, I’ll manage to convince him.”

# Chapter Six

## Drake

**N**INE HOURS OF grueling moments with extreme action, followed by tons of paperwork and dozens of superficial injuries, and Drake felt alive. He hadn't been bored once, not even when he fed an elderly woman Jell-O while they waited for her family to pick her up because she'd wandered out of her assisted living apartment.

The only bad part had been the sensory overload of working with Margo. Or rather, working in the same 10,000 square feet of hospital space. She was fast to pawn him off on a gorgeous redhead in her last year of residency in emergency medicine. But he remained completely distracted by Margo's presence, from her dark brown hair she kept in a thick long braid to her high cheekbones and full, pouty lips. Some people would categorize Margo as thick or full-figured, but he thought she was the perfect image of a woman. The sway of her hips only emphasized her round bottom, and he knew she was hiding a 1940s pin-up model beneath her scrubs. If anything, she'd only gotten more attractive with time, which seemed like a cruel joke at his expense.

"Hey, did you hear me?" Margo said, standing on the other side of the nurses' station where he'd been writing patient notes and fantasizing about her. "Go home. The second shift has arrived," she said. "I'll be your attending for the duration of this experiment you're playing with your career, but I need to meet with Dr. Hart to turn over the patients and I usually cut my shift loose once their replacements arrive."

"Dr. Hart? The same doctor you're dating?" Drake asked, keenly interested in seeing how serious they were.

Margo stiffened and looked to the other nurses that were listening and not even remotely pretending not to.

“Good night, Dr. Maguire.” She walked away down the hall to the small office clearly not willing to talk about her personal life.

“How serious are she and Dr. Hart?” Drake asked the nurses, but they just laughed and ignored the question.

“Who told you Dr. Monroe and Dr. Hart were dating?” his partner Nina asked, grabbing her things from off the counter.

He was getting the feeling this wasn't a well-known relationship.

“I just assumed when I saw them together at the hospital event last week,” he said, not wanting to be the one spreading gossip.

“Well, you know what they say about assuming. See you tomorrow, partner.”

Drake couldn't help but smile. There was only one way to find out if Margo was really dating Dr. Hart. So after grabbing his things from his new locker, he knocked on the office door where Margo and Dr. Hart sat close in the small space.

“Excuse me, I just wanted to pass Dr. Hart a message,” Drake said, leaning into the doorframe. They both looked up, but Margo grimaced at him with narrowed eyes. “My cousin Finn said hello. He also said I should probably steer clear of you because you're, and I quote, ‘just as likely to use a can opener as a scalpel and don't believe in anesthesia.’”

Dr. Hart stood and extended his hand to Drake as he laughed. “Finn Maguire is your cousin? What a small world. That crazy SOB just needs to not get shot during a kamikaze mission next time he's in Lebanon, and he'll be safe from my can opener.”

Drake shook his hand. “Well, he’s my favorite cousin, so thanks for saving his life.”

Margo huffed and began pounding away on her tablet to add notes to a file.

“Finn and I served on the teams together. He’s hardcore. He probably would have tied his own tourniquet if I’d let him. Margo tells me you’re considering joining Mercy?”

“Yeah.” He looked at her again, but she refused to meet his eyes. “I think I’ve been away from home long enough. And plastics gets a little predictable, so I thought I’d spend some time in the ER.”

Dalton laughed. “You won’t find anything predictable in the ER. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me. Next time I get your cousin out for a drink, you’ll have to join us.”

“Sounds great. Have a good shift. Good night, Dr. Monroe, I’ll see you in the morning,” Drake said and paused until Margo’s eyes shot up. Her lips lifted in a pinched smile he recognized as her annoyed-but-wouldn’t-say-what-was bothering-her face.

“Good night.” She flipped her braid back over her shoulder.

He had no choice but to leave them to their work, even if every part of him wanted to stay. But the moment he walked out of the emergency room, his body felt like it was completely depleted. Learning a dozen ER policies and procedures, coupled with being around Margo, had taken their toll. He made his way to the long-term stay hotel a few blocks away. He found it the day before when he decided he was staying longer. A furnished apartment within walking distance of the hospital was his home for the next month. But leaving Margo behind with Dr. Hart left a pit in his stomach. To make

matters worse, Dalton was a nice guy, probably a great guy. But Finn had said he'd be surprised if Dalton was looking to settle down with anyone.

As far as Drake was concerned, Dalton wouldn't be settling down with Margo. She was definitely his one that got away and had the power to pull him right back to being twenty-one. A full day around her made it clear he wasn't over it.

They'd basically lived together in his dorm for four years of college at George Mason before they both got into medical school at UCLA. Then two days before they were due to move, she told him she couldn't go. The scholarship she was depending on fell through, but he knew there were student loans or he could have helped her if she'd just let him. She'd applied for a local safety school without telling him and said she was going to go there instead. It was the feeder school for Mercy Hospital. He hadn't even known she'd had a safety school.

It felt like she'd kept a backup plan from him and all of a sudden decided it was her new plan A—without him. He hadn't applied anywhere else. UCLA had the best program in the United States for plastic surgery, and he had an offer from a prestigious medical practice if he could complete the program at the top of the class. He did both.

He'd argued they could do long distance, but she'd said no. She couldn't worry about time zones and never seeing each other. She wanted to focus on school. He'd been forced to choose between his dream of medical school or staying in Virginia to be with Margo. And he chose UCLA. By the time he looked back, she'd cut him off.



THE NEXT WEEK was the toughest he'd had since finishing medical school. He was constantly learning something about ER procedures, getting yelled at, and sewing up patients.

“What is it about people and knives? I've already sewn up five people today, and it's—” Drake said.

Margo and Nina yelled in unison, “Don't jinx it.”

The next person through the door was a man with a large hunting knife protruding out of the side of his leg.

“Son of a—” Nina popped him upside the head.

“What was that for?” he said, following the nurse and the man with the knife wound.

“Negative reinforcement. Next time you're about to jinx us, you'll associate it with pain. It works,” she called out after him.

Margo's melodic laughter sounded from behind him, but she turned to greet Dr. Raj, another attending physician on rotation in the ER. She would spend the next half hour reviewing patient notes from the previous shift and then slip away without saying good night. It was her routine after every shift. At least she wasn't meeting with Dalton again. He hadn't expected the jealousy to be so swift when he'd seen her with Dalton at the gala, but clearly it had been more than enough for him to consider moving back. But seeing them together night after night was getting old. He needed to know how serious it was.

Tonight Finn invited him for drinks after work at a nearby lounge, and Dalton was joining them.

After dealing with the knife guy, and seeing no sign of Margo, he cleaned up and met his cousin at the high-end whiskey tasting room. He had learned



that not only was Dalton a former SEAL, but he was also quite wealthy, with the kind of money that gave a man the luxury not to have to work. However, Dalton preferred to work in the most intense medical discipline in the hospital, the ER. He wondered if that was what drew Margo to him. Walking into the venue in black jeans, a gray shirt, and black coat, he felt underdressed when he found Finn and Dalton both in polished menswear and a waitress eyeing them like candy while asking for their drink order.

“Gentlemen,” Drake said as he took a seat in the empty plush black velvet chairs that matched the trendy, modern decor. Finn leaned forward and shook his hand while Dalton just nodded.

“Cousin, how bad is it working for a man who runs on adrenaline and green smoothies?” Finn asked.

“Well, to be frank, it feels like I’m running downhill and going to hit a brick wall every second of every shift,” Drake replied.

“Let me guess, I’m the brick wall,” Dalton said with a laugh.

“But are you happy with your decision?” Finn asked.

“I have a few more weeks to decide for sure, but I’m going to start looking for a house, if that tells you anything. It’s fast-paced, with no drama.”

“No drama for you in the ER?” Finn said.

“Oh, there is plenty of drama,” Dalton said. “Every nurse and half the patients want to sleep with him.”

“Only half?” Drake asked.

“There’s only one person that seems immune, if not hostile,” Dalton said.

But the waitress chose that moment to bring their drinks and took her time, clearly unable to decide who to flirt with more. Drake fiddled with his

napkin, eager for her to leave. He wanted to hear what Dalton was going to say.

“Who could possibly find my cousin less than?” Finn smirked once the waitress was gone.

“Dr. Margo Monroe is not a fan,” Dalton said.

Just as he suspected. He took a long sip of his drink and let the harsh honey-hued liquid coat his wounded pride.

Finn just smiled and stayed quiet.

“Care to fill me in?” Dalton leveled Drake with his icy-blue eyes.

“Nothing to tell, really, but I’m curious what she said to give you that impression.”

“Only that she would prefer you work on my shift, but the director insisted she manage you.”

“Well, that’s not much to go by. Why do you think she can’t stand him?” Finn asked.

“Cut the shit. Margo likes everyone. And every woman in the hospital wants to work with him. Also, she hasn’t fallen for my charms in the three years we’ve worked together. So clearly, our boy Drake has some history with her.”

That got his attention. “I thought you two had something going on.”

Dalton laughed. “That’s another thing. Why did she want to make you jealous? She won’t talk about it.”

Relief washed over Drake. If Margo was only pretending to date Dalton, that meant she was single.

“Maybe she doesn’t date doctors,” Finn said.

“Let me guess—you’re the reason she doesn’t?” Dalton accused.

He held up his empty glass toward the waitress, who was staring at them from the bar, and let out an exhale.

“We dated in high school and college, and it ended when we went to two different medical schools. End of story. So my guess is, you’re just not her type.” Drake smirked.

“I’m every woman’s type, single and rich, but Margo has always been too focused on work to notice. Maybe now I know that you’re her weak spot, I’ll just make sure I’m the one she uses to make you jealous.”

Drake narrowed his eyes on Dalton, who laughed.

“All right, stand down. I won’t go after your girl. But you better get used to discouraging suitors. Margo’s a catch, and at some point someone is going to sweep her off her feet.”

“I don’t have any claim to her. She’s already found me lacking,” he said and polished off his second drink in two gulps.

“Maybe it was just bad timing,” Finn said, giving Drake the benefit of the doubt.

But Drake didn’t feel like debating it, and instead he stood to leave. “Thanks for the drinks, but I have a date with my pillow.” He dropped a hundred on the table. “I’m going to go home and sleep for twenty-four hours before my next shift. My new boss is a real ball buster.”

Dalton laughed. “It’ll get easier. We’ve just got you broken in. Now the real fun begins.”

Finn stood and gave him a manly hug. “Come to Sunday dinner on your next day off. Mom and Dad would love it.”

“If my next day off ever falls on a Sunday, I’ll be there.”

Drake didn’t miss several women eyeing him as he left the bar full of posh people getting their weekend started. But for some reason, he was disinterested—and had been ever since he’d started working with a curvy brunette with hazel eyes. He walked back toward the garage at the hospital, but he did have two drinks tonight. There was a little drizzle, but the hospital was only two blocks away. But as he got closer, he decided he better get a taxi. He’d never risk his entire career or someone’s life. He stopped on the sidewalk just outside Mercy.

Like a thirsty man, he conjured up an image of Margo right in front of him, his own Margo mirage. Except she was holding a huge umbrella and stood looking from side to side outside the ambulance bay. He couldn’t have ignored her, even if he knew he should. Walking through the rain, he stopped a few feet away from her.

“Do you really have a policy against dating doctors?” he asked.

“What?” she said, whipping her head around. “Drake, what are you still doing here?”

“I was having a drink with Dalton and my cousin. Why are you still here?”

“A van flipped and they have multiple victims, so I’m helping out.”

“Imagine my surprise tonight when Dalton said you two aren’t dating and you never date doctors.”

The faint sound of a siren called through the air in the distance.

“I don’t know why you or Dr. Hart would care who I date.”

“Well, he cares because he’s attracted to you, and I care because I never stopped caring.” He cringed at that honesty that slipped from him.

The rain was picking up, and his hair was drenched. The sirens grew louder, and she stepped closer to cover him with her umbrella.

“You cared so much you left for LA without a single look back?”

Her accusation was like a sobering smack. She was the one who had ended things. She was the one that chose to change all their plans.

“You said you didn’t want me anymore.”

She cursed as the sirens grew louder. They had a few more seconds before she would have her hands full.

“This is like the twilight zone. I couldn’t afford your plans for UCLA medical school when I didn’t get the scholarships. I said I couldn’t go, but you just insisted it was too late to change your plans. You left, and then you stayed away.”

“You hooked up with my brother,” Drake blurted as his mind raced to consider her version of what happened.

“No, I didn’t. I was *helping* your brother. Just because you left didn’t mean I wasn’t still friends with Ian. Did you really believe I would sleep with my ex-boyfriend’s younger brother? Like some tawdry revenge for you leaving me?” She took a deep breath. “I don’t date doctors because at the end of each shift, I need a break from medicine and egos. Yours is currently on full display. Go home.”

The ambulance whirled into the circular driveway, and she passed the umbrella to him. The paramedics hopped out and opened the back of the ambulance where there were two people on stretchers and a third sitting on the bench holding an injured arm.

He hesitated. He was a doctor; he wanted to help. But he couldn't after having two drinks.

"Go home, Drake," she ordered him before running along the first gurney back into the hospital as the paramedics rattled off the patient's ailments.

Every impulse said to go after her, but she was working and he needed some food and to sober up if he was going to spar with her about their past. So much of what she said didn't make sense. He did leave for medical school, but she was the one that had changed all their plans last minute. And he had no idea what she was talking about helping his brother, but he was going to find out.

Ian was his polar opposite. Where Drake had been cerebral and almost obsessive about academics, Ian couldn't have cared less. Although Ian was equally intelligent, he lacked the desire to follow through on his academics back then. He focused on being the head of the swim team, getting girls, and finding any kind of mischief. For some reason, Ian was always in competition with Drake.

It started when they were kids. Ian would say their dad favored Drake, and at first, it seemed like an exaggeration. Later it became much more obvious it was true. It drove Ian crazy and a huge wedge formed between them, but Drake never understood why until the first time Ian got in real trouble. He was eight and accidentally set fire to their backyard, but their dad blamed Ian's precarious nature. Their dad thrived on order and sought perfection, and Ian was a free spirit. Ian had balked at their father's influence since birth. His mom would say Ian was her wild child, just like her, but it only justified the division.

In high school, their dad would take interest in Drake's grades and sports, but even when Ian won the state championship for swimming his sophomore year, their father was more focused on his mediocre grades. Ian continued to get into trouble, as if disappointing their dad was a challenge. But when his girlfriend died the summer before his senior year, after sneaking out of the house and going to a party with Ian, it was the final blow. As a state attorney, their father had been furious his own son was mixed up in a huge criminal investigation. There were allegations of underage drinking and drugs. In the end, it was determined that Ian had refused to go to a college party and was at home when his girlfriend died of an overdose. But that didn't stop everyone else from blaming him, or Ian from blaming himself. Drake was away at college, and his parents would say Ian had amped up his mischief and shut them both out.

The only way to find out what Margo meant was to ask his brother, but Drake always found it difficult to have any kind of meaningful conversation with him. After years of strain, their relationship was nonexistent. Then a few years ago, he'd heard from a friend at Mercy that his rebellious brother Ian was dating Margo. The most hurtful betrayal of all. It was like they were both twisting a knife in his back.

Even now, after they'd been broken up for over ten years, both different people, she still had so much power over him. The sting of her rejection was still there.

But for the first time, he wondered if he should have dug deeper into what went wrong. Before they found out which medical program they each got into, they had talked about marriage after medical school. He'd been elated to get into UCLA, then destroyed by her complete change of heart. She'd said he didn't understand how stifling the debt was. But at the time, he thought it

was an excuse, that her feelings had changed enough that she didn't want to be stuck across the country with him for medical school. Then she was gone, all the plans they'd made just cast aside.

But now all he wanted was a do-over, and to be close to her, or at the very least, to understand exactly what had happened.



# Chapter Seven

## Margo

**A**FTER YET ANOTHER restless night's sleep, all Margo could think about was the big pot of coffee that should be waiting for her in the doctor's lounge. She'd hit snooze twice that morning for a few more desperate minutes of rest instead of making any at home. But now she was eager for a hot cup after the cold walk to the hospital three blocks from her condo.

She'd established a deal with Dalton a few years ago that they would always have the coffeepot ready or already brewing before the next shift. He hadn't forgotten once in the last almost three years—until today. Her red coffeepot was missing from the counter, and in its place was an industrial-sized machine that looked like it would require several barista engineers to work it. Gone were the eclectic mishmash of funny coffee mugs, replaced by slick, new, ergonomic cheerful yellow mugs.

She'd cry if she didn't get a strong, hot cup of coffee soon.

"What the hell is this?" she barked at no one because the lounge was empty since she was early before the shift change to review all the cases Dalton would be turning over to her.

The old coffeemaker was nowhere in sight. She was going to have to run up to the cafeteria and pay a fortune for a cup of hours-old coffee. And if she had to guess, there was one man to blame for this contraption. Its shiny, expensive look screamed Drake.

"Care to try a cappuccino or maybe a mocha latte?" His smooth baritone sounded from behind her.

“Speak of the devil,” she whispered. “You did this.” She spun to face him. She slammed her things down on the small portion of the counter that was empty.

“If you’re accusing me of giving the staff the best coffeemaker in the world and the best ground coffee beans, then yes, it was me.”

She walked up to the machine and grabbed a mug, placing it on the metal tray.

“I just want a big cup of coffee from the old machine that I gifted the staff and the fresh ground beans I supply from the local farmers’ market.”

He pressed a few buttons, and the beans in the clear container at the top began to swirl, the light buzzing sound to indicate they were being freshly ground. She watched, transfixed, like a child waiting for candy to fall from the sky. Finally, a low hum, and golden-brown liquid began to fill her mug. The air smelled of rich soil and the distinct scent of high-quality, fresh beans. When her cup was filled with the deep brown liquid gold, she closed her eyes and took a long inhale before blowing on the brew.

“Good enough for you, chief?” he said with a playful tone.

He was standing too close.

Her back stiffened, but she bit her tongue. She wasn’t going to let him ruin her morning. No matter how hard he tried to get a rise out of her, today she would remain calm.

“I even made sure to get mugs in your favorite color. It’s still yellow, right? Or did that change in the last decade?”

Stunned for a moment, she stalled by looking around the counter.

“Where is my coffeepot? Or did you already throw out the low-end appliance to make room for this absurd machine?”

Drake moved past her, brushing against her arm, and she fought the urge to touch her arm where it tingled from his touch. Opening the cupboard on the end of the small kitchenette, she spied her sad coffeemaker and discarded mugs.

“Everything is here, in case you want to keep it.”

Blowing on her coffee, she took a tentative sip. The delicious taste soothed her ire. “I’ll offer it to the orderlies for their down room,” was all she said before turning her back to him, hoping he would leave her in peace.

“I’ll be sure to run any more gifts for the team by you first in the future.”

Again, she shook off his attempt to goad her but then noticed her sign-up sheet for the holiday decorating on the bulletin board had only one other name on it, Drake Maguire.

He must have noticed where her eyes landed.

“Looks like no one else wants to cut snowflakes out of paper for hours with us,” he said. “Don’t worry, I’m happy to help.”

Gulping down the hot coffee, she stifled her retort and then an alarm overhead sounded, indicating a critical case was arriving. Drake departed the lounge like a superhero.

She let out a strangled breath, and her shoulders slumped. Just being around him was her own personal hell, and it only highlighted the need for her to seriously consider her next move. She couldn’t practice ER medicine forever. It was too emotionally draining and difficult to meet anyone besides other doctors. But if she could get him to sign a contract with Mercy, maybe

they would let her leave the ER sooner as the new deputy director, or she could find something far away from Drake.

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THE NEXT FEW days, she attempted to avoid Drake as much as possible, but as his direct supervisor, it wasn't easy. Working with him was inevitable but pairing him with another seasoned fifth-year resident helped. Margo only needed to guide them with the more complicated cases, or get involved when multiple victims arrived at the same time to help triage. Drake was a skilled surgeon, but he was also an exceptional doctor, both decisive and able to treat his patients with compassion. The harder she tried to stay away from him, the more he seemed to seek her out asking about every aspect of managing an ER. Everyone was singing his praises, and he seemed to excel under the pressure. He was also annoyingly thoughtful, bringing in bagels or donuts for the staff, and he was slowly driving her mad.

The final straw was when she overheard another resident claim she was going out with Drake that weekend. She had been clear about the rules when he'd arrived, and it had only been a week.

When he walked into the pharmaceutical room, which was located behind secure glass doors, she took advantage of the fact they were alone.

“You win, Drake. You've taken over my ER. Everyone thinks you're this golden stud who walks on water. But dating another resident in the same ER is a recipe for drama and against the hospital rules.”

He slowly turned in mock surprise with a wicked smile that brightened his tired midnight-black eyes.

“You know, Dr. Monroe, you sound jealous, but that couldn't be since you were the one uninterested in continuing our relationship. Or was it the

buttercream-stuffed cake donut holes that won you over again? You always were a sucker for cake.”

His deep voice echoed in the confined space, and her body went hot.

She huffed. He was infuriating, but at the same time, she had an overwhelming urge to kiss that smug look off his face. His audacity to move across the country without even trying to come up with a plan and then claim she broke up with him was insane.

“Is this some kind of game for you? Torture me and taunt me until what, I quit? What is your endgame?”

“Why would I want you to quit? And whose rule is it that a resident can’t date another resident? I didn’t see it in the handbook.” Closing the distance between them, he pinned her with his broadening scowl but was careful not to touch her. He was close enough for her to smell his spicy soap scent and feel the warmth coming off him. “Which makes me think it’s your rule for me, but why?”

She opened her mouth to refute him, but the words stuck. Either she had to admit she didn’t want to see him with anyone else, or worse, that she still wanted him, like all his other fans. Or she lied and said she just hated him. But before she could say anything, his hand lifted to caress her face. Pushing a loose strand of her hair off her cheek, his thumb ran along the line of her jaw before falling away.

“Or maybe it’s like a childish game. You don’t want me, but you don’t want anyone else to have me?” he said.

His words snapped her out of her trance.

“So you admit you’re dating the staff here? It’s like shooting fish in a barrel for you? Too easy to resist?” She took a step back from him.

“You should talk. You’re dating another attending, right?”

She stomped her foot. “You saunter back into town, stir up my ER, but we both know you’ll be gone again soon. Are you trying to punish me for not being able to follow you to LA? Because I’m not the one that ended things, so don’t try to rewrite our history now.”

His smile faded, and his gorgeous mouth fell open.

“Me? You think I ended things between us? You changed your mind about UCLA and me two days before our move. You told me you didn’t think long distance could work. You broke up with me, you changed your mind about us.”

“Nope, that is not what happened.”

Her heart pounded like drums in her ears.

He ran his hands through his hair, further disheveling it and causing the waves to fluff. Oddly, it only made him look more attractive.

“I didn’t come back after med school because there was nothing to come back to. You made it clear you didn’t want me and chose to stay. Then after med school, I heard you were spending time with my brother. Friends saw you together multiple times. It sounded like you had moved on.”

She thought back to the last time she saw Drake’s younger brother, Ian. They’d actually gotten along pretty well the entire time she dated Drake, even though as brothers they seemed more like enemies. Ian had been the devil to Drake’s role as angel, but it was clear it was all a façade. Some need to piss his father off and annoy Drake drove Ian to seek out bad behaviors. One of which got him into trouble as an adult and landed him in Margo’s ER one night during her first year. She’d been horrified to find him wasted and bleeding. She’d lectured him about squandering his privileged life all for

some childish vendetta, and she'd made him promise to stop drinking. He'd always been one to party too hard in college. He swore he would get his act together if she didn't tell Drake, and then, a few weeks later, he asked for her help.

“Well, it wasn't what you think. And if you were really so worried, why didn't you ask one of us about it at the time? If you had expressed any regret for how things ended or come back, maybe we could have...” She trailed off because she didn't know what they could have done. She felt like they were going around in circles, and it was starting to drive her crazy. “But you stayed gone.”

He looked up at the ceiling and put his hands on his hips. “I thought everything fell apart because you stopped loving me. And I didn't come back because I thought you didn't want me to.”

She gasped at his words.

“I never wanted you to leave, not without me. I didn't choose to not go to UCLA. I couldn't afford it, not even with the scholarships. I didn't qualify for enough loans.”

Drake's eyes narrowed. “You never told me it was about the money.”

“I said we should apply to backup schools in case we didn't both get in, or I didn't get the funding. Then I said I couldn't go, and you said you had to go. It was an impossible situation. If I asked you to stay, you would have been at least a semester behind, and if I'd gone, it would have taken me years to save up enough money to afford UCLA, and they weren't going to hold my slot.”

Before he could respond, a nurse walked into the cool room to retrieve medicine for a patient. Her head bounced back and forth between them. But

Margo did an about-face and reached for the door to exit. Her stomach ached with the thought that Drake actually thought she'd stopped caring about him when they broke up? Yes, she'd been forced to change her plans for medical school when the amount she could borrow and scholarships fell short, but she hadn't expected Drake to want to go without her.

All their plans changed the moment she couldn't go to an expensive school. He'd given up on her and gone away without her.

Drake's family had been wealthy enough for him to never have to worry about how to pay for school, and Margo had always noticed the difference in their financial status. Was it possible he didn't realize how much tougher it had been for her? The student loan department didn't care that she'd been forced to give him and their dreams up, or that she'd never stopped caring about him.

All this time, she thought he'd chosen his medical future over her, but then to hear him blame her for their breakup, it was too much. For him to believe she could have ever dated his brother, felt like another arrow to her wounded heart. This proved their past was a stone best left unturned. It was too painful and messy. He was only back temporarily, but once his mom had a clean bill of health, the excitement of the ER wore off, and his glamorous life in LA started calling, he'd be gone again.

She just needed him to stay long enough for the board to select the new deputy director, then he could go on his merry way. She would play her part, even if it meant she was stuck working with the man she might still love. And even if he blamed her for how things ended.



# Chapter Eight

## Drake

**D**RAKE FELT ROCKED to the core. He had pushed Margo because he needed her to explain why she thought they'd broken up. Now it was clear she blamed him for ending things between them, but maybe she still cared about him.

Maybe she'd never stopped.

Why else would she be bothered by the idea of him dating someone at the hospital? All these years, he'd thought she had been the one to walk away. How was it that two people so in love and connected could see such a pivotal moment in their lives so drastically different? Had he been so blinded by the dazzle of UCLA medical school that he missed what was going on with Margo? His parents had been elated when he got into the medical program and had a top-tier medical practice looking at him. Margo had been excited too at first because they'd both gotten in. But then suddenly, she changed her mind about taking on student loan debt, like it was the excuse she'd needed. It never dawned on him that she didn't qualify for enough loans. At the time, he'd been so crushed and then overwhelmed with medical school he'd just pushed it aside.

He'd only been back to Virginia twice in the years they'd been apart, and he'd never sought her out or confronted his brother. But now working with her, it was clear they still had a very real attraction, and he had been missing out on a lot. It was like a door was opened on a world he'd forgotten. In LA it was state-of-the-art facilities, uber-wealthy clients, posh, boring, easy, routine. But in the ER it was challenging, unexpected, messy, dramatic, and Margo.

He'd had no choice but to find a way to stay longer after learning about his mom's health. And seeing Margo. Because when he'd touched her, it felt like a bolt of lightning mixed with memories, and something he was missing in life. It had been surprisingly easy to convince Mercy to let him spend time working in the ER, and while his practice wasn't happy about his hiatus, the other physicians were more than happy to take the thousands of dollars' worth of procedures he had booked and pad their own accounts.

The problem now was getting her to admit there was still something between them and convince her they owed it to each other to explore it. He had insisted the director assign him to work with Margo so he could be close to her, but he knew as his supervisor she probably felt an obligation to remain professional. He was going to help her move beyond that, but first, he needed to speak to Ian. Because it was time to clear up why they were always at odds and fix it, one way or another.



DRAKE WAS FREEZING since he was forced to wait outside the Mindful Rehab Clinic an hour outside the city, a facility where his brother had apparently checked himself into.

It wasn't lost on him that he had no idea his mother was sick or his brother struggled with an addiction that warranted the need to go to rehab, more than once. Or the fact that Ian confided in Margo and not him. The oddest thing was that his mother had even known where he was and didn't show any distress when she told him.

After almost twenty minutes, his brother finally appeared through the thick glass doors and spoke to the guard shielded behind another set of glass. Next, Ian walked toward him and was buzzed outside. Instead of inviting

Drake in, he opened the door and pulled out a pack of what looked like holistic non-tobacco cigarettes.

Ian grimaced before sliding one between his teeth and offering one to him. Drake bit down on his knee-jerk reaction to tell Ian he was an idiot for offering a doctor anything that looked remotely like an inhalant.

“No thanks.” He took in his brother’s casual clothing, a name tag on his T-shirt. His dark blue eyes were clear, like the depths of the ocean, with no bloodshot indications of any kind of substance.

“Um, are you allowed to exit? I didn’t mean for them to let you out,” Drake stammered, unsure what he should say.

“Yes, I’m allowed out. It’s not a prison. What are you even doing here? You didn’t call me for a decade, and now you’re suddenly bugging me at work?” Ian said, walking out into the sunshine and lifting his face to the sky, the unlit cigarette in his mouth.

“Wait, you’re working?”

“Yes, why else would I be here?” Ian replied, but then one eyebrow cocked up and he eyed Drake. “Wait, did you think I was a patient here?” A sly grin spread, and he almost dropped the cigarette. Then he started chuckling to himself.

“Ian, can we pretend for five minutes you don’t despise me? And will you please just catch me up on your life? What are you doing here? I thought you were a public defender.”

Ian huffed. “Mom said you were coming. I just didn’t believe her.”

“Look, I know we never got along, but I’ve never hated you. I didn’t care for your party lifestyle or the way you punished Mom and Dad while you

found yourself and rebelled against anything Dad ever said, but haven't we grown out of all that?"

Ian laughed. "I don't know. It looks like I still enjoy getting a rise out of you."

Drake huffed and ran his hand through his hair. His brother was the one person who could drive him insane. Maybe it was because he knew he had so much potential. Ian was always sharp witted and an exceptional athlete.

"Okay, yes, we have grown out of it. I just assumed you'd written me off. It took me hitting rock bottom and getting arrested, but I'm not that kid anymore. I haven't been for years, but it's fun to let Dad think I still am once in a while."

"So you had a drinking problem, but you're sober?"

Ian shrugged. "Honestly, I wasn't even good at that. It started out small and recreational—a little booze and weed in high school. It's funny how much you can pretend to be something you're not, and people will believe you." Ian sat on a bench nearby. "Everyone thought you were the golden son, so I got to be the bad egg. When Alex died, that really put me in a dark place."

Drake waited, holding his breath. He'd never spoken to his brother about everything that happened surrounding his high school girlfriend's death, but they'd all known it changed him. Alex was a bad influence on Ian. She was a party girl, but people blamed Ian. Even though Ian had been home in bed the night Alex died. She'd gone with some older kids to a party in the city and overdosed the first time she'd tried opiates.

"Then in college, drinking heavily became a bit of a problem. After getting arrested at a frat party that went bad, I was suspended from the swim

team. Then one more party that ended with me having my stomach pumped, and I was done with it. That was my rock bottom.”

“And Margo was the one to help you?” Drake stated. It all made sense now.

“Well, she had the unlucky privilege to be the doctor in the ER that night and then lectured me for the next twenty-four hours about what I was doing to my body. She drove me to my first AA meeting, and it was tough at first. You know my friends were all in that party lifestyle, and the clean version of me was a downer to them. I slipped up a few times, and Margo was a sponsor of sorts. She said she wouldn’t tell you or our parents on one condition. I had to check myself into rehab and agree to see a therapist. That was the summer before law school.”

“You let me think you were sleeping with Margo instead of telling me you needed help? The last time we spoke, I called to ask you why you were seeing her.” Drake took a deep breath, and he watched anger, annoyance, and regret wash through his brother’s eyes.

“It was a dick move, and I owe you an apology. I probably owe you at least a dozen more for all my stunts over the years. My therapist calls it displaced blame. Taking out my demons on you is a shit excuse, but it’s the only one I have. But the fact that you could think I would sleep with your ex-girlfriend or she would sleep with me was idiotic on your part.”

Drake put his hand on his brother’s shoulder, unsure if he would push him away, but he needed to bridge this space between them.

“No, you’re right. I shouldn’t have assumed either of you would do that to me, and I’m sorry I made this about me. I’m sorry you didn’t feel like you could come to me,” Drake admitted.

“I wasn’t ready to talk about any of it. It’s like I needed time to be pissed at the world and destructive. And just bad.”

“You’re not bad, just difficult sometimes.” They both laughed. “Did Mom know you were sick?”

“She isn’t an idiot, but she never asked me directly. She likes to live in her nonconfrontational world and not look at the cracks too much.”

“You may want to at least let her know you’re not here as a patient anymore. She made it sound like you were on a day trip, like maybe she thinks you still need to get your act together.”

Ian laughed and shook his head. “I guess I can’t blame her for not being sure.”

“So, if you’re not here for yourself, why are you here?” Drake asked.

“In my work as a public defender for juveniles, I refer a lot of the kids to rehab. You know most kids don’t want to be criminals. Something else in life has pushed them into acting out or desperation. Then they end up exposed to alcohol and drugs. Volunteering here gives me a chance to check-in on previous clients. When I sit in on sessions and remember how dark things can get.”

“Margo knew all about this?” Drake asked.

“Not all my drama, but she had a front-row seat to me getting my act together. You can’t be mad at her. Doctor-patient privilege. Sponsors are sworn to secrecy. I put her in a bad position. But I honestly never thought it would come up. Neither of us ever expected you to come back home. Also, I thought you two were done?”

“So did I.”



AFTER TALKING TO his brother, it was clear Margo was the reason he was restless in LA, and she was the reason he was considering this move back to Virginia. He needed to know if they'd made a mistake all those years ago. Even now, were they both just blaming the other and afraid to try again? The only way to figure it out was to spend as much time with Margo as possible.

He'd discovered she'd channeled her love for the holidays into volunteering for lots of events at the hospital. So he logged into the hospital's virtual bulletin board and signed up for all the same events. The first one was tonight, pine cone art in the children's oncology department.

Now he had the perfect excuse to be wherever Margo was.

After grabbing two candy cane lattes, Drake arrived at the hospital children's event, which was packed with dozens of kids with their families and numerous nurses and doctors still in their uniforms. He spotted Margo's dark braid and was happy to see she'd also changed into jeans and a bright red Christmas sweater. Maybe he could convince her to get a bite to eat with him later.

Before he could deliver her a coffee, another resident spotted him and was batting her eyes, asking if he wanted to join her table.

"Actually, I've already got an assignment, but thanks."

He caught Margo watching him and smiled broadly at her, but her lips remained in a tight line.

Setting one of the cups on the table in front of her, he leaned down to speak in her ear. "A peace offering."

He stood and walked around the other side so he could face Margo and survey the table full of glitter, glue, pine cones, and several young faces.

“Hi, team. I think this is my seat?” Drake said.

The kids nodded.

“Are you sure you’re in the right place, Dr. Maguire? This is the children’s holiday glitter art day,” Margo said.

“Uh, I happen to love glitter.” He pinched a pile of green glitter and flung it up in the air over the table. “Duh.”

The kids burst into giggles while Margo’s hazel eyes looked like molten gold as she squinted at him in annoyance, and she used her hands to talk.

“Dr. Monroe, do you think if I held your hands behind your back, you could speak, or do you need them to help you find the words you want to use?”

She paused. “Don’t change the subject.”

The kids were keenly interested in their exchange, and they didn’t hide their smiles or giggles.

He sat down directly across from her and leaned forward over the table.

“You don’t want me to be here?”

“No, it’s not that,” she replied, although it sounded like a question.

He couldn’t help but laugh, because she was lying. Her telltale habit of biting her lip when she was uncomfortable was giving her away.

He reached out and gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger, unable to resist touching her. “You are lying, Dr. Monroe.” Then he slowly moved his hand up along her jaw, letting his thumb trace the line that ran up to her high cheekbones. “You also have glue and glitter on your face already. I think I better stay and supervise you.”

The kids laughed.



Margo pulled out of his reach and took a gulp from the hot latte as if she needed it for relief.

“Delicious right?” He eyed her before turning his attention back to the kids. “Now, can someone explain to me what we’re making and how not to be as messy as Dr. Monroe?”

That earned him a few more laughs from the kids, and he picked up a pine cone.

“This is going to be so fun,” he said and winked at Margo.

She looked like an animal that just realized it was trapped, but he couldn’t help but wonder if she also liked it. There was definitely a spark every time he touched her, and he was going to find out if that might turn into a raging fire with a little encouragement.

For the next hour, he flirted and peppered Margo with questions about her life over the last ten years, books she’d read, and places she’d been. All the while, he told the kids dozens of jokes.

He made an effort to touch Margo as much as possible and was fairly certain his tactics were working to distract her when she took another break from their table. But when she stormed off abruptly to the bathroom, he considered his next move. Go in for the kill and just plant one on her or try to get her to ask him to kiss her. Getting her to beg would be tough, but probably so worth the reward.

# Chapter Nine

## Margo

“**S**HOOT, SHOOT, SHOOT,” Margo said under her breath, huffing as she slipped into the ladies’ room. After an hour of sitting with Drake and the children, she needed a break.

Why was she letting him affect her so much? So what if he was gorgeous and brought her coffee? He was also her ex-boyfriend, and she was his supervisor. It was unprofessional and self-destructive to be so attracted to him. And from the look on his face, he was starting to realize she wasn’t completely disinterested in him. But why would he care? They’d both moved on. Hadn’t they? She knew he had a glamorous, successful life in LA, and she had her work and her family. He didn’t need to know it was otherwise empty.

“Shit.” She groaned, shaking the thoughts of Drake away as she washed her hands. This was an impossible situation. Being this close to the man she never wanted to give up was torture.

After work, she typically stayed far away from Mercy, but Christmas was like her Super Bowl. She loved every single aspect: the decorations, the baking, the ugly sweaters, the eggnog, the movies, the music, and most of all, the events. She loved to participate in all the festive events, but she hadn’t expected to see Drake there.

Distracted as she exited the ladies’ room, she ran right into a cozy, warm chest as she rounded the corner. Her hands landed on two very muscular shoulders, and she squeezed her eyes, unable to resist breathing him in.

“Woah, lost in thought on how to add more glitter to your works of art?” Drake said in his deep voice that made her want to wrap her arms around him.

A shiver danced up her arms where his strong arms gripped her through her sweater and offered steady support.

“Something like that,” she said, and her voice was noticeably strained.

He didn’t let his hands fall away but instead rubbed them up and down the length of her biceps. “I’ve actually been doing a lot of that lately too. Thinking.”

His tone implied his thoughts might be about her, but she didn’t trust either of them to believe that was true. Instead, she rushed to change the subject.

“You’re good with the kids. Maybe you should consider pediatrics instead of emergency,” she said, stepping back and forcing his hands to let her go.

A playful one-sided smile pulled at his lips.

“I’m having fun with this art project, but I don’t think I could work with sick children all day. Too heartbreaking. I think emergency is a better fit.”

She nodded, but had no clue why he felt that way. Ten years of living across the country, and suddenly her emergency department was where he thought he needed to be.

“That would be a big change from plastic surgery—less pay, shift work, long hours, working nights and weekends. But if you do decide you want to punish yourself, you could probably find a job in any ER in LA.”

“I think Virginia would be better,” he replied.

She gulped. “In that case, you may have arrived at a good time. Because they’ll probably have an opening by summer.”

Drake narrowed his eyes at her.

“The director mentioned she expected to have a position, but he didn’t say anyone was leaving. I just assumed they were adding to the staff.”

Fidgeting, she slid her hands into her back pockets. She wasn’t about to reveal her plans since she had no clue if she would actually get the deputy director job, or what she would do if she didn’t. He didn’t need to know she’d been exhausted by the pace of the ER for several years, but her contract kept her there. She just needed to sell him on staying at Mercy to help with her application for the deputy position.

“That’s what I hear, too,” she said, trying to dismiss her hint that she would be moving on.

Drake just nodded.

“I’ll see you back in there,” she said and walked away.

Her focus was slipping, but she needed to remember what was on the line. There was no room for her to get distracted by Drake. Over the next few weeks, she would be attending multiple fundraisers the hospital was hosting for the holidays, where she planned to schmooze the donors and sell herself for the new job. Most doctors looked for any excuse to avoid the donor events, but this year, she made herself available for every single one. It was the easiest way to get face time with the board and stay busy.

If she stayed busy, she could stop thinking about how a jolt of energy stole her breath every time Drake touched her. She could ignore how his long lashes flirted with every blink and those dark eyes that felt like he could see into her soul.



“I DON’T SEE why you need to sift through racks of used gowns when you’re an attending physician,” Izzy said.

They were going through stuffed racks at a local consignment store so Margo could find a few dresses for all the events she’d signed up for. Her sister was five years younger than Margo and didn’t realize how expensive med school was, even with assistance from Mercy.

“It’s called student loans. When you finish your art degree, you’ll be in the same boat.”

Izzy laughed. “Getting pregnant freshman year may have been cheaper in the long run. I don’t think I need an art degree anymore, but maybe I should study business. I make more as a hair stylist than I ever would have as an art history major.”

“I guess a business degree would be useful if you sell your art,” Margo admonished. Izzy was an exceptional artist but had moved back home after only one year of college when she got pregnant. The father had wanted nothing to do with her or the baby, but Izzy said there was no way she wasn’t keeping her daughter. Of course, their parents were disappointed with how they got their first grandchild, but Sophie was the light of their life.

Margo pulled a sequin red jumper off the rack and held it up for Izzy.

“Well, it has major disco vibes, but we could probably make it work. Why do you need so many gowns, anyway?”

“I volunteered to attend several hospital fundraising events, so I need to look the part,” Margo fibbed.

“You are such a sucker for holiday events.”

“True, and the first one is an event at the Navy Yard, so I was thinking something conservative.” She spotted a blue taffeta gown that looked like it belonged in a Miss America contest. It was long and flowy with an open back and tied at the neck.

“Can you take in a few or fix the hems in time?” Margo asked.

“Of course, but you have to tell me why you signed up for so many events you once called ‘pimping ourselves out for cash the hospital will spend on the wrong thing.’”

“I’m more mature now and realize a private hospital can’t recruit the most talented physicians and provide state-of-the-art care without donors with very deep pockets,” Margo replied, pulling several more dresses off the racks and handing them to Izzy until they both had their arms full.

“Right, and what is really going on?”

“You know my contract is up this summer, so getting a little extra face time with the decision makers might help me secure my next job. And I figured this is a great chance to meet some new people outside of work.”

“Okay, okay, finally time to dust off the old hoo ha?” Izzy said, as they walked into the changing area that was really an old storage closet with a few shower curtains hung up as dividers.

“Can you not be yourself so much?”

“No, then you’d get bored.”

They both burst into laughter when an older woman pulled back the shower curtain she had been changing behind and gave them a disapproving look.

“Okay, let’s start this fashion show,” Izzy said once they caught their breath.

For some reason, everything was always funnier when she experienced it with her sister. She was closer to Izzy than anyone else in her life, which admittedly was very few people. But she wasn’t ready to mention the deputy position until it was real, or the fact that Drake was back, because it didn’t mean anything for their nonexistent relationship. Losing Drake had been the hardest time of her life, and her sister would get protective.

“Wow,” Izzy said as Margo stepped out in a simple red dress that didn’t have any embellishments or sequins but seemed to hang on her curves in all the right places.

“It’s not too…”

“Sexy, glamorous? No. It’s demure and the perfect shade of red for Christmas. Your curves are just sexy,” Izzy said, and the old woman from earlier popped back into the dressing room.

“You better get that dress, young lady, or I will.”

One look at Izzy’s reflection in the fogged mirror, and they both busted out laughing again.

“I guess I better take it,” Margo said finally when she caught her breath.

“And wear it to the first event. Then, when the hospital makes tons of money, you can focus on finding a date.”

“Dating sounds terrible. Maybe I’ll just collect plants and books,” Margo said.

“What about sex? You can’t tell me you don’t want to have any of that for the next six or so decades? Just think of dating like fishing. You can

throw back all the small ones,” Izzy said.

“Izzy,” Margo said between laughs.

“It’s true. Small minds, small bank accounts, small . . . cars—you need to find a real man.”

“Oh my gosh, let’s go buy all of these and then some margaritas,” Margo said.

“Now you’re talking,” Izzy agreed.



THE NEXT NIGHT was the first hospital donor event, and the only complication was that Margo had to change at work and walk around the ER in her gown. The donors were being given a tour of several departments at the hospital, and then everyone would head to the swanky cocktail party. She was hoping to do her short portion of the tour fast and avoid running into as many of her colleagues as possible. She stood in her crisp white doctor’s coat, with a tablet in hand by the elevator, waiting for the first tranche of donors to arrive in the hectic ER for a quick look. She didn’t plan on showing them much, since gunshot victims and drunk Santas were on trend that week.

She was ready with a big smile plastered on, but when the elevator doors opened and the group of donors wearing their finest suits and gowns, with women dripping in diamonds, all surrounded Drake, she fought the urge to scream. This man was like an itch she couldn’t scratch. A fly she couldn’t kill.

“You’re all in for a real treat now,” Drake said, ushering the donors off the elevator. “This is Dr. Margo Monroe, one of our three brilliant attending physicians. She has dedicated the last ten years of her life to this hospital and serving the community. She has saved countless lives, and on my first day, I



witnessed her in action. Believe me when I tell you she is spectacular to watch,” Drake said in his deep, coaxing voice.

And when his eyes landed on hers, she could swear he was implying something other than her medical prowess.

Clearing her throat, she ushered everyone to approach a wall of windows with a view into the hub of the ER. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I understand I’m your last stop on the tour. This is the ER at Mercy, and I assure you it is always a busy place,” Margo said.

But before she could get any more of her speech out, the alarm sounded. She and every doctor, including Drake, knew what that meant: there was no time to spare. In any second, they would be inundated with multiple life-or-death cases.

“And that concludes the tour,” she said, pulling her hair back and quickly attempting to braid the long thick locks she’d curled in the doctor’s lounge between patients.

“That alarm you hear indicates we’re about to receive multiple critical cases, and unless you want to risk getting blood on your Louies, I suggest you all head back up to the donors’ suite,” Drake said, pressing the button for the elevator to come back down for them.

“Well, it might be worth waiting just a minute or two,” one of the tall men with a pompous air said standing his ground.

“Get that tour out of here,” Dalton called, running past them to meet the first gurney with one paramedic riding on top as they performed compressions on the person, and two others wheeled the gurney into the first empty bay.

“I’m sorry, you’ll all have to leave,” Margo said before she ran for the next gurney flying through the door with a woman screaming and her arm covered in blood.

The next thirty minutes went by in a blur while they treated multiple gunshot victims. Margo’s hair was tied back with the elastic of a medical mask, and she was washing her hands for the fourth time, unsure if the red on her nails was nail polish or blood.

“Hot date tonight?” Drake asked as he sidled up next to her at the long sink where they each scrubbed off the latest trauma.

“I’m supposed to attend the donor event at the Four Seasons, you?” She noticed for the first time he had slacks and a dress shirt underneath his white doctor’s coat. A much more formal style than the typical scrubs all the doctors wore in the ER.

“I’m attending the same event. Looks like you’ll be stuck with me all night,” Drake said.

“What, why? Residents never attend these things.”

“I think the director is hoping to convince me to stay with a few fancy parties.”

Her stomach sank. How was she supposed to get away from him if he was attending all the same events? If anything, she would have to spend more time with him and watch as he charmed everyone.

“Don’t worry, I’ll save you a dance,” he teased before walking away.

She was so screwed.

# Chapter Ten

## Drake

**D**RAKE WAS GOING to kill whoever made that red dress Margo was wearing because it was torturing him as he watched her work the ballroom. The women adored her, and the men couldn't keep their eyes off her. The material hugged every curve, giving him, and everyone else, more than a hint at what a spectacular figure she had. The gold strappy heels she wore accented the muscles of her calves, and her long, dark locks bounced. He had an overwhelming desire to wrap that hair in his palm and drag her mouth to his.

“So you're the plastic surgeon, turned emergency room doctor. We've been hearing some concerns about your talents going to waste,” one of the hospital's longest and most generous donors told Drake, and he was forced to pull his eyes off Margo. “Care to tell me why you're so interested in emergency medicine?”

He leveled his eyes at the older man. He was likely not the kind of person that did anything without giving it great consideration, but money always gave people the opportunity to be impulsive.

“I could tell you I wanted to help people with more than their wrinkles and fear of aging, but the truth is, I need more excitement. More opportunities to stand on that edge of death, and experience the challenge of saving a life. Maybe it's the adrenaline, but I'm sick of the mundane elements of plastics.”

“How refreshing, an honest answer,” the man said. “Now, tell me what you know about Dr. Monroe. Her ten year contract is up soon with Mercy. What do you think of her?”

If Margo had signed a ten-year contract with Mercy that meant she needed them to help pay for med school? He had heard a few students in his class taking similar deals, but they'd needed the edge to get into medical school and help with the tuition. It was the kind of deal that got them the education but limited their ability to practice the medicine of their choice and where they would be forced to practice it. Margo came from a working-class family. Her parents had been ecstatic for her to get into medical school. They had supported her dream of attending UCLA. He knew the financial aid had been an issue, but he hadn't known about the contract.

"Has it been ten years already?" he said, stalling to consider his words.

"In June, her contract ends. The board has been debating on offering her a new position managing the residents and recruitment. But staffing the ER is always an issue, and it's unclear if she would even be willing to stay. Eight years in emergency medicine must take its toll," the man said thoughtfully.

Margo must have sensed their eyes on her because her gaze found him from across the room, then flicked to the man he was speaking to. She plastered on a dazzling smile and returned her attention to the women she was talking with.

"Dr. Monroe is a brilliant physician. I think your hospital got the deal of the century getting her to commit to ten years at Mercy. More importantly she is a fantastic teacher. The residents love her, and she's been very supportive of my time in the ER. You'd be fools to let her go, but if I were you, I would ask her exactly what she wants. The only way to keep a doctor like her is to know what they want and then counter with something better."

"That's quite a rave review from a plastic surgeon with your reputation."

“Margo is the best doctor I’ve ever worked with and probably hasn’t reached her true potential yet. That’s my honest opinion. Even if it means her beating me out for a position as an attending.”

“If you have your sights set on the ER, we may just have to find a way to keep you both then.” The man smiled. “I’ll let you work on the other donors. My money always goes to Mercy,” he said before walking away.

Drake made a beeline to Margo and smiled at the woman she was speaking with. “Excuse me, ladies, I’m going to borrow Dr. Monroe for a moment.”

They nodded as he cupped her elbow and guided her out onto the exterior covered terrace with heat lamps and twinkling lights.

“Drake, this isn’t a social event. We are here to schmooze.”

There weren’t any others out on the terrace, but he made sure to walk past her beyond the view from the French doors so no one would see them.

“Why did you sign a ten-year contract with Mercy, going into medical school? And come to think of it, how did you end up in emergency medicine? You always said you were hoping to go into cardiology or oncology.”

“I changed my mind.” She pulled her elbow out of his hand, and he missed the feel of her skin the moment she was gone.

“Why, Margo?” he asked again.

“It is none of your business, but I can see you won’t let this go.”

“Damn right.” He had an overwhelming feeling he’d missed something very important ten years ago, something that caused her to change all their plans.

“My father hit a financial snag my last year of college at Georgetown, so I agreed to attend a local school to save on the cost of out-of-state medical school. Then George Mason offered half-off tuition to any doctors willing to commit ten years in emergency.”

“How big of a financial snag?” he asked.

“Big enough to make that offer too good to pass up.”

“And that’s why you didn’t want to go to UCLA?”

“I couldn’t afford it. They will only give a twenty-year-old so much in loans. The scholarships, cost of living, books, it didn’t add up. Of course, I wanted to go to UCLA. Who in their right mind would pass up attending one of the most prestigious medical programs in the country?” She turned to head back into the ballroom, but he captured her hand and threaded his fingers with hers.

“Maybe someone who felt trapped in a relationship they didn’t want to be in anymore?” he asked.

Her scowl faded, and her mouth pursed. “I never felt trapped with you. I don’t understand why you would have thought that.”

One of the doors swung open, and the head of the hospital events zeroed in on him. “I thought I saw you duck out here, Dr. Maguire. Some of the ladies would like an impromptu consultation with the hottest plastic surgeon in the emergency department, Dr. Maguire.”

Margo slipped by her and melted into the crowd. He didn’t have another chance to speak with her the rest of the night. But he felt like he’d found a puzzle piece he didn’t know was missing from the story of their breakup. All this time, he’d thought she’d fallen out of love with him and was no longer

interested, but this proved there had been other reasons for her not to go to UCLA, and maybe other reasons not to be with him.

But was there a reason they couldn't be together now?

# Chapter Eleven

## Margo

ONE WEEK CLOSER to Christmas, three different hospital donor events, and Margo was deeply regretting her plan to volunteer to get face time with the board. All the board members were focused on the donors, and Drake had attended all the same events. It was as if he'd seen her name on the calendar and signed up for any event she was attending. So she was stuck schmoozing donors while watching women flirt, fawn, and throw themselves at him. If she had to watch one more woman pass her number to him, she was going to spaz out. The only thing that made it bearable was the amount of attention she was also getting tonight from all the handsome Navy doctors at the Walter Reed Center Holiday Extravaganza. Mercy partnered with the military hospital to provide expert consultations on cases for the veterans, and this was the liveliest donor event so far.

“Monroe, don't dance with those SEALs. They all have wives and one thing on their minds,” Dalton said, pulling her into his side. “Besides, if you're looking for a military man, I'm right here,” he teased.

She didn't miss Drake's eyes from across the room, squinting at the two of them standing so close together. They had all been given the lecture not to congregate in one place and to be social with any donor that wanted to talk to them.

“I almost feel bad for Dr. Raj, stuck in the ER while we're both here,” Margo said.

“Oh, don't feel bad for him. Feel bad for Drake. He's on his fifth consultation with the wives of all these SEALs, and I would wager he's



terrified one of their husbands will kill him.”

Margo laughed but also felt murderous when one of the women took his hand and placed it on her obviously fake breast.

“Oh crap,” Dalton said, making his way over to Drake before the woman’s husband could.

Instead of following Dalton and making a fool of herself by staking an imaginary claim on Drake, Margo walked up to the table of SEALs and decided to play with fire.

“Do any of you gentlemen know how to dance?” she asked as the military band began to play a lively salsa tune.

“Oh well now, aren’t you the brave one?” A man with a shaved head, polished beard, and Southern drawl stood, reaching to grip her hand and walk her out to the dance floor.

“Is your wife in this crowd?” she asked.

“No, ma’am. Although I’m known to be a daredevil, I’ve managed to stay single so far,” he said in his enticing twang.

“How have you managed that? You’re too handsome and too good of a dancer to be a wallflower.”

“Well, deploying every six months helps, and I make sure to only fall in love with women that are in love with someone else,” he said.

He moved fluidly, taking her along and guiding her steps in a dance she’d done hundreds of times but never felt so connected to her partner before.

“How could you possibly know if a woman is in love with someone else?”

“It’s always obvious when you don’t have someone’s undivided attention, like now. You’re either trying to make that other doctor jealous or you’re trying to avoid him, but since you can’t keep your eyes off him for long, my guess is the first.”

“Your observation skills put a girl at a strong disadvantage,” she said, not trying to deny that she had been watching Drake most of the night. She just hadn’t expected anyone to notice.

He pulled her body in closer to his now as the dance slowed before the crescendo. “I can help you forget him for a time, but something tells me you’ve already tried that. So I’ll settle for making him jealous.” He moved his mouth close to her neck and whispered in her ear, “Which I believe we’ve done.”

The song ended, and they stopped only a few feet away from where Drake stood on the edge of the dance floor, blatantly watching them. But before he could say anything to her, a donor claimed her for the next dance, and her SEAL was also whisked away into another dance. An hour later, she sipped some champagne by one of the makeshift bars and wondered how she could get out of attending the rest of the events she’d signed up for.

“Have you eaten anything yet?” Drake asked, coming up to stand next to her at the small cocktail table hidden behind a huge Christmas tree display. He set a plate of appetizers down, and she eyed the cupcake in the center.

“Not yet,” she said, stiffening her back.

“These events are worse than a Friday night in the ER,” he said.

“Seriously, I can’t believe how much people don’t understand about medicine and yet are willing to donate such large sums of money.”

“I guess it’s human nature not to ask too many questions and just believe what people show you.”

She could feel some tension rolling off him but wrote it off to their ongoing feud.

He pushed the plate over to her. “I got this for you. It’s a bad idea to drink on an empty stomach. You probably still get the giggles, and I doubt the donors want to see your air guitar.”

“Know-it-all.” Unable to resist, she plucked the cupcake off the plate and peeled the paper wrapping down. “Just because you remembered I like cake doesn’t mean you remember everything about me. And I don’t get the giggles when I drink.”

His head fell back, and his laugh sent a warmth through her from her head to her toes. She’d missed that sound.

“You must forget who you’re talking to. Just because it’s been ten years doesn’t mean I could ever forget how insanely giggly you get when you have champagne, much less on an empty stomach.”

She shoved a bite of the cupcake in her mouth to avoid the laughter that threatened to burst out of her. And then a second bite.

“Exactly, eat up gorgeous, but between that blush and you biting your lower lip, I know I’m still right. You haven’t changed that much.”

“Neither have you. Still bossy, but with a new grumpy tone.”

“If I’m bossy, it’s because you were too busy tonight flirting with the entire Navy to remember to eat, and if I’m grumpy, it’s because I was forced to watch it.”

She didn't dare ask why he would care. There was no good reason for them to go down that road. There was too much hurt between them, and he was only back temporarily.

Once she polished off the plate of hors d'oeuvres, she dusted her hands. Standing with her at the table, Drake watched her in companionable silence, but now she was at a loss for words.

"Ready to go back into the fray?" he finally asked.

Looking up, she thought his eyes seemed sad. "Thank you."

His hand lifted to frame her cheek, and his thumb ran along her bottom lip before he swiped at something in the crease of her mouth.

"Just a crumb," he said, his voice a whisper.

"Why are you being nice to me?"

"I'm tired of pretending I'm still mad at you, when really I never was." His other hand came up to cup her face, and she closed her eyes, willing herself not to bask in the desire coursing through her.

A voice inside was screaming "yes," but was also telling her not to make a mistake she couldn't take back. But his body heat was enticing, and his touch sent a tremble through her body, making her crave more.

"Drake," she breathed, a warning and a request.

"I know. This is not the appropriate place. But you can't tell me you don't still feel this connection between us, even after all this time." Then his hands fell away from her face, and he walked away.



"OH MY GOSH, he's still in love with you," Izzy said in a hushed tone over the phone. "I can't believe he has been here for weeks, and you're just telling me

now.”

“No, he’s just messing with me. First, he invades my ER on some silly whim to practice real medicine for a few weeks. Then he buys this insanely massive coffeemaker that makes the most delicious brew it would make you cry. Next, he flirts with every single woman within ten feet of that hospital and attends every event I sign up for just to torture me.”

“He told you he still wants you. He has come up with some excuse to work right alongside you ten years after you broke up with him. And maybe he is done with his glamorous life in LA,” Izzy replied. “Maybe you should ask him to stay.”

“I did not break up with him. He left me. He’s only here for one more week, and then he heads back to his real life in LA. Mercy would like to recruit him, but I don’t think they stand a chance competing with his fancy plastic surgery career.”

“I just don’t see the harm in telling him you want him to stay—or better, test out this vibe. See if it’s just the remnants of an old flame, or if it can be coaxed into a raging fire again. You owe it to yourself and me. You need to get some, and I want to hear about it.”

“You read too many of those romance novels if you think we could just pick up after ten years. Also, I’m his supervisor, and I wouldn’t even know how to test out this vibe. Whatever that means.”

“I’m telling you, he still wants you. I bet he would even move back here for you if you just gave him some encouragement.”

“No, he made his choice when he left ten years ago. How sad would it be for me to throw myself at him and then watch him leave again? He could have stayed then, and he can choose to stay now on his own. We had plans

that went beyond medical school, but he left and never came back. There is no happily ever after here.”

“Until now. He is back now. And for the record, those romance novels are my only romantic outlet, so don’t knock it until you try it. What they will teach you is where there was love once, love remains. Don’t let your pride get in the way now. Maybe he has regrets,” Izzy said.

Her beautiful sister had sworn off men since she had Sophie seven years ago. With thick dark curls, curves that matched Margo’s, and dazzling blue eyes, Izzy was the type of woman men couldn’t help but notice. But she’d been so hurt by Sophie’s father, she was too guarded to really put herself out there again. A few men had managed to break through her tough facade, but as soon as they found out she had a child, they weren’t interested in playing family.

“I’m just calling to vent. I’m not looking for advice on how to manage Drake.”

“Okay, good. Because you know I think you should just start sleeping with him and see what happens,” Izzy said.

“Oh my gosh, for someone who is terrified to sleep with anyone for fear of getting pregnant again, you’re very quick to tell me to be promiscuous.”

“The difference is, you and Drake both have fantastic jobs, healthcare, and I’m certain he wouldn’t act like a coward and leave you high and dry if you were carrying his love child. Besides, those eggs aren’t getting any younger,” Izzy teased.

“And on that note, I’m going to bed. Thank you, dear sister, for this supportive conversation,” Margo said.

“No problem, just promise you’ll tell me once you two start getting it on. Love you.”

She hung up, leaving Margo with a head full of fantasies about what it would be like to sleep with Drake again. Like every other woman in the hospital, she could easily see Drake’s sex appeal. She hadn’t missed how he’d grown from being a gorgeous young man into the type of man that commanded attention: muscles honed from years of dedication to his fitness, a thick head full of dark hair, and the faint lines of maturity that made men look even sexier as they aged. Her only option now was to try to ignore all the feelings he evoked.

# Chapter Twelve

## Drake

**T**HE THING HE loved most about working in the ER was the pace of each shift. There was no time to think about anything but his current patient. He could block out his nonexistent personal life and his desire for Margo, most of the time. Touching her again had given him clarity. He needed to find the right time away from the hospital, away from donor events, just the two of them, to see how she would react. Her skin had been like silk, and her body had shivered in response. He could swear she would have welcomed more from him, but it was a work event, and she was his attending physician. But outside the hospital, they were still the same college sweethearts that never got a chance to see what they really had.

A nagging voice still made him hesitate. What if he misread her? What would it cost him to believe she wanted him still, to only be rejected again?

Eight hours into a ten-hour shift with back-to-back trauma patients, Drake was dragging. So when there was a chance to either take his thirty-minute dinner break or have a nap, he crashed on an empty bed in the children's intake bay.

The moment his eyes closed, he saw Margo laughing and spinning on the dance floor with one faceless man after the other. Just when he was about to storm out on the dance floor and claim her, she turned and walked off the dance floor toward him, then threw her arms around his neck, smiling up at him.

“Aren't you going to kiss me now? I'm yours, Drake. I always have been.”



She felt so real in his arms, he could even smell her soft soap and the argan oil she used in her hair. Her voice sounded in his ear, and when he opened his eyes again, she was hovering above him. Her thick hair cascading down to tempt him, and her hand on his chest.

“This is the most realistic dream I’ve ever had,” he said.

Sliding his hand up her shoulder, he threaded his fingers into her silky, thick hair before gripping the nap of her neck and instinctively pulled her mouth down to his. Her plump lips opened with a gasp right before his mouth crushed over hers to steal it.

She tasted like mint and something he couldn’t name, something that’d he’d been missing for years. Pulling her closer, his other arm wrapped around her waist, and she made a sound of resignation before he could feel the pressure of her kissing him back.

“Excuse me, doctors, but I need this bed for our patient,” Nina’s voice said with humor.

Drake was struck with how odd it was for his colleague to be in his dream too. Before he could consider it, Margo pushed herself away from him and wiped at tears he hadn’t noticed on her cheeks. He sat straight up. They were, in fact, at work.

“I’m sorry. I thought we were somewhere else,” he mumbled.

“Well, wake up,” Nina said, “because we’re still at work and I need your consultation on this case.”

A nurse pushed a young girl in a wheelchair holding an ice pack and a mound of gauze on her left cheek right before Margo’s sister Izzy appeared. The little girl eyed him, and it was clear the wound was still bleeding. That was all he needed to wake him up fully.

“Drake, this is my niece Sophie,” Margo said.

“Hello, Miss Sophie. I’m Dr. Drake. Can you tell me what happened?” He squatted down so he was at eye level with the pretty girl with big brown eyes and lots of brown curls. It was 7:00 a.m., and his shift was ending soon, but there was no way he was leaving now.

“Well, I was getting ready for school, and I went outside to get my Hula-Hoop because it’s show-and-tell today. Mr. Myers was letting out his dog Rufus, and I guess Rufus thought he needed the waffle in my mouth more than me, and when he lunged for it, he bit me instead.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, and then Mama freaked out, yelled at Rufus and Mr. Meyers, then called Auntie Gogo, and here we are.” She smiled while holding the wound still.

“Drake, it was bleeding a lot,” Izzy said.

Margo cleared her throat. “She’ll definitely need stitches, and I’d appreciate it if you’d handle it.”

“Of course, Sophie, let’s get you up here, where I can get a better look. I’m going to tell you everything I do before I do it. I’ll have to clean the wound and put a little medicine on it before I can close it up. There will be a little pinch, but if you can be tough, you’ll get a teddy bear and a balloon.”

Her big brown eyes opened wider, but she nodded her head up and down. “Deal, I’m super tough, right, Mama?”

“Yes, baby.”

Drake wasn’t accustomed to having such a young patient or an audience, but it was clear Margo and Kelly weren’t leaving. Then several of the

residents filed in near the curtain, wanting to watch a skilled plastic surgeon work.

“Sophie, these doctors are all still in training and would like to watch, but I’ll only allow it if it’s okay with you.”

“Does that mean you’re, like, the best? Auntie said you are, but I thought she was just trying to calm Mama down.” Sophie dropped her voice. “Mama’s worried I’ll look like Scarface, but I don’t know who that is.”

Drake laughed as he cleaned the wound and applied a numbing cream around the punctures and one long gash that was likely the cause of all the blood.

“Your auntie is usually right, but don’t tell her I said that,” he said, and they both laughed.

“Okay, I’m going to numb you, and this is the only part that’s going to hurt a little bit. Then I’m going to talk through my steps so the residents can learn. Are you ready?” Drake asked.

Sophie took a deep breath, and Izzy held one hand while Margo stood on the other side to hold the other. He could see the worry in Margo’s eyes.

“Everything will be fine,” he said, more for Margo and Izzy’s sake.

“I’m going to buy you a big treat after this too, baby,” Izzy said to the little girl as the nurse passed him the syringe below Sophie’s line of sight so she wouldn’t get scared.

“Okay, small pinch, but hold still no matter what.”

Sophie nodded, closing her eyes tight while she held perfectly still. She grit her teeth, but once the numbing took effect, he could see her petite shoulder relax. Drake worked swiftly to install two layers of stitching where

the dog bite had gone deeper. Once he did the final stitch, he put another layer of soothing salve over it.

“All done, super Sophie, not only are you tough, but you’re the best patient I’ve ever had,” Drake said.

The little girl’s eyes twinkled, but she was careful not to smile too big.

“It’ll feel a little numb for the next hour, and then it’s probably going to ache a little. I’ll give your mom a prescription for that. It’ll need to stay covered and protected while you’re at school, and you’re probably going to need a scoop of ice cream once a day,” Drake said.

Sophie gave him another side smile with the opposite side of her mouth.

Dalton muscled his way in to enter the room, looking for some of the residents. “All right, thank you Dr. Maguire for that fascinating lesson. Back to work, doctors,” he said, ushering them out. Nina brought Sophie a pink teddy and a purple balloon.

“See, Mama? All better.”

Izzy swiped at fresh tears and hugged Sophie while Margo followed Drake to the sink.

“Thank you,” she said clearly, still worried.

He gripped her wrist before she could step away.

“About that kiss . . .” Drake said.

But Margo shook her head. “It’s fine. You were asleep and didn’t know who I was.”

“No, I knew exactly who you were. I had just been dreaming about you, and I’m not apologizing.”

Her eyes grew big, but then Sophie interrupted.

“Auntie, do you do what Dr. Drake does? Cuz I want to be a doctor like him one day,” she said.

He let his grip on Margo go, but not before he whispered in her ear, “This is not over.”

If she thought he was going to pretend they didn’t just have the most emotionally charged, passionate kiss, she was about to have a rude awakening. Because that kiss made it clear Margo still had feelings for him, which completely contradicted what he believed since she broke his heart.

But now, he was seeing both their recent kisses from a new lens. Her annoyance with him was because of their attraction, not her distaste for him. When he touched her, she didn’t balk. If anything, she leaned into him. He had taken advantage of the opportunity to kiss her the first time because he had been so jealous seeing her with another man that he was blind to her reaction. But now, after this sobering kiss, he could recognize her kissing him back, see the emotions in her eyes.

Margo Monroe wanted him, and he was going to find out why she was set on pretending not to.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Margo

**S**HE COULDN'T BELIEVE how badly her emotions were unraveling. Not only was she stuck with Drake working in her ER, but when he touched her, she wanted more. When he kissed her, it was like time stood still. Nothing else mattered, and she wanted to close out the world. His warm hands pulling her into him had been so welcome, she'd leaned into him and kissed him back this time.

Even now, her cheeks heated up just thinking about it.

That was a day ago, and she'd avoided him since, but today was the designated date to fully decorate the doctor's lounge, and nurses' stations in the ER. The hospital made them wait until the first week of December because some offices would either leave up decorations all year or start too soon.

Okay, she would start too soon. But she couldn't resist the red and green, and holiday cheer most years. It was the one time of year she could believe in happily ever afters, and she'd clung to that since she was a kid.

But this year seemed different, everything was muddled with her trying to cope with working with Drake. She was so fixated on avoiding him she'd lost sight of some of her favorite aspects of the holiday season. Cinnamon spice donuts, secret Santa gift exchange, and visiting the shops downtown for the annual ladies' night, Christmas shopping events. There were always good sales and unique finds. She went every year, but this year she was too hell-bent on scheduling the ER decorating event on Drake's day off to focus on what mattered.

She couldn't believe he had the nerve to sign up to help out on the decorating committee. Why would he want to spend more time with her? Granted, he'd been antagonizing her since he'd arrived in the ER, and they were thrown together for work, but signing up for her event meant he was volunteering his personal time to be with her.

But this was her ER and her committee, because Christmas was her favorite holiday, and Drake knew that. Some might find it childish how much she loved the lights, the music, the decorations, the fake Santas on every street, and the magic. But now, as she attempted to untangle the strings of lights from the bunches of tinsel that were poorly packed last year, she was not feeling holly or jolly.

"Reporting for duty. What can I do?" Drake said, walking into the doctor's lounge and invading her solitude.

"Ughhh." She let out a groan, unable to mask her annoyance.

No one else had signed up to help decorate, but she suspected once word got out that Dr. Hotness was actually there, they'd get another half-dozen volunteers. The female population in the hospital had an uncanny ability to know where Drake was at any given time, and they would appear out of nowhere to chat with him or try to get his attention. They had dubbed him Dr. Hotness, and she couldn't help but agree with the accurateness of the name, even if it was infuriating.

Standing in the dimly lit space with the light of the hallway behind him, Drake looked like a gift from heaven in jeans, a black fitted long-sleeve shirt, red scarf, and a big sly smile.

He was carrying two coffees and his puffy winter coat. The several days' worth of scruff and a beanie cap covering his dark hair accentuated his square

jaw. This man was so handsome it physically hurt to look at him for too long.

“You really intend to help me decorate on your first day off?” She huffed and attempted to throw down the tinsel, but it was wrapped around the lights, which she successfully got her arms and feet tangled in.

His deep laugh sounded closer as he set the coffees on the conference table.

“Yes, and I brought us candy cane lattes to get in the mood.” His voice pushed goose bumps up along her skin.

“Why are you doing this, really? Your mom said she’s doing much better, and her doctors are optimistic she won’t need another round of chemo. You’ll be able to head back to LA by Christmas,” she said, letting her shoulders slump.

“She isn’t out of the woods yet, and I’m really enjoying my time back home. I’m considering staying permanently. Not to mention that I love to decorate for my favorite holiday. I could end up working here, so it’s smart to establish some goodwill,” he challenged, picking up the lights from the floor.

“What do you mean?” she said, freezing in motion.

“I assumed you knew the director of the hospital offered me a job. They want me to stay.” He took a sip of his coffee.

“You’re considering staying at Mercy, but what about your career in LA? What about your life there?”

“It’s funny how little roots I actually put down in California. I’d probably have to go back and gather up a few more of my things and say goodbye to my colleagues. But I’m guessing they’ll be happy to take over my lucrative portfolio. The practice partners will counteroffer to try to get me to stay, but I’m starting to think I’ve outgrown plastic surgery.”



Margo was shocked. She never thought he would actually consider staying. She assumed once his mom was better and his consultations with the plastic surgery department were wrapped up, he would leave. It was bad enough realizing she still had feelings for Drake and working with him temporarily, but having to work in the same hospital would be too much.

“I can’t tell if you’re annoyed or disappointed with the idea of us becoming permanent colleagues,” he said.

She clamped her mouth shut and pasted on a smile. “Oh, I think it’s great news. Great for Mercy, great for you, and great for your family. I’m sure your parents will love to have you back home.”

Shuffling through the lights again, she looked anywhere but at him.

“Very convincing. Maybe I should take over dealing with those lights. You look like you have your hands tangled.” He moved closer to help.

But she pulled away.

“You don’t like the holidays, especially Christmas.”

“Says who? You’d be surprised how many people splurge on plastic surgery procedures for the holidays. It’s a huge moneymaker.”

She scoffed. “Of course you like it now because it made you a lot of money.”

“I happen to love Christmas. But in high school and college, I enjoyed razzing you more. Playing grinch to your spastic elf on a festive bender was fun.” He looked in the bin at her feet and plucked out a bunch of fake mistletoe. “Maybe we should get some fresh mistletoe this year, so no one mistakes this sad bundle for a weed.”

With another deep breath, she spun away from him, only to further tangle her ankles and lose her footing in the lights. But Drake was there to catch her, and the electric heat that pulsed through her body as his arms enveloped her was almost enough for her to forget they were enemies now.

“I’m fine,” she said, getting steady on her feet but still clearly tangled.

Before she could argue, he kneeled down and grabbed her leg, forcing her to use his shoulder to balance or fall on the floor.

“Don’t argue, and don’t move. You’ll ruin the lights,” he said as he continued to pull the cords from around her legs while winding them around his elbow. The heat coming off from his body being so close to hers was like an old familiar blanket. His nearness was sending her senses into a panic; sweaty palms, racing heart, and dry mouth. Once he had untangled her bottom half, he stood up.

“Looks like I’m the only one that planned to help out today, so you’re going to have to let me or be stuck here all night.”

She cringed.

“It won’t be so bad. We don’t even have to talk to each other. We can just sing Christmas carols at the top of our lungs. But in the interest of time, why don’t I take over the lights?”

“Fine, you’re taller anyway. You can do the lights and the gingerbread house doorframe,” she said as a yawn slipped out.

“Sounds like you need to head home and get some sleep. I can manage this alone, unless you’re afraid I’ll mess it up.”

“I’m not leaving until this room is a winter wonderland. The festivities begin tomorrow.” Finally unraveling the rest of the tinsel and lights from her

arms, she grabbed the sparkly snowflakes that needed to get hung along with candy cane-striped garland.

“What festivities?” he said, before handing her a latte.

Unable to physically refuse a caffeine-filled Christmas in a cup, she accepted the sugar-laced brew and fought the shudder as their hands touched.

“There will be a secret Santa selection—where we each choose a name out of a hat and have to find a gift for a colleague, a group gingerbread house construction project, a potluck, and of course the hospital’s annual holiday gala. But we’ll have our own little party as we get closer to Christmas.”

“And you’re the ringleader for all of these events?” he asked, sipping his coffee and setting the now untangled lights on the table.

“There are usually a few others interested in helping, and Dalton took over the secret Santa duties. I think he likes to try to pair up the people that don’t mesh and force them to get to know each other better.”

“I thought it was supposed to be random?”

“As random as it can be when Dalton’s in charge.” She shrugged.

“Will you be attending the gala this year?” he asked.

She stopped fiddling with her cup and looked up to find him watching her intently. “I don’t think so. Attendings take turns each year. So since I went last year, it’s Dalton or Dr. Raj’s turn.”

Drake nodded but didn’t say anything. She hooked her phone up to the portable speaker she’d brought and started her favorite holiday playlist. And for the next thirty minutes, she wondered if he was planning to attend the gala. Would he be wearing his expertly fitted tuxedo and have a gorgeous

woman on his arm? Was he really back and staying for good? She wasn't sure she could believe he would stay or how she should feel about it.

He looked like the same boy she fell in love with in high school, but all grown up and with an edge. His dark features, tall confidence, and deep voice were like magic that could cast a spell on any woman. It was a mystery no woman had managed to get a grip on him and lock him down into marriage.

Man candy with a medical degree.

When she finished with the snowflakes, she turned to find Drake had all the lights up and was starting on the faux gingerbread house archway that went around the entrance on both sides. It was over the top and totally up her alley, she thought as she surveyed the room. He was laughing as he unfolded the cardboard contraption.

“What’s so funny?” She huffed.

“I think your love for Christmas has only gotten more childlike.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” she said with a yawn.

Now it was his turn to let out a huff. “Why did you plan this job after a shift?”

“My next day off isn’t for three days, and we’re already late with getting these up. Besides, I like to handle the decorations every year, or we’ll end up with a sad Christmas wad of lights. The ER staff need to have some holiday cheer—there will be an uptick in disturbing cases the closer we get to Christmas Eve, and it will wear on everyone.”

Another yawn snuck up on her.

“Okay, go home, or you’re going to staple gun yourself, and then you’ll have to let me give you medical care.”

Tapping her list of decorations to put up, she shook her head. “But I still need to . . .”

“Good night, Margo,” he said in a commanding tone as he crossed the room and took the rest of the garland away from her just as another yawn racked her body.

“I’ll come in early and finish whatever you don’t feel like doing,” she said, but he ignored her, walking away with her list and a wave over his shoulder.

With one last stolen look of him framed by the Christmas garland he’d tossed over his shoulder, she grabbed her bag and left. Being stuck in the same room with him hadn’t been as volatile as she’d expected, but it still hurt. Being close to him while they were still worlds apart was just a reminder of everything she’d lost.

Tucking into her big winter coat, she walked out into the cold evening to head home. But her mind was back in college when she and Drake were still a couple, before everything got ruined. The last time they spent Christmas together, she’d been sick with the flu, and it was so bad she had to miss all the festive events and couldn’t travel home. But Drake had stayed with her, and while she’d slept, he’d hauled a huge, real tree into her little dorm room, strung lights, and hung ornaments that each represented something about their relationship. Everyone else had traveled home, but they’d stayed shackled up the entire break, swearing they’d always be together and spend every Christmas Day in bed.

Then, less than six months later, she’d been forced to walk away from their plans, and he hadn’t looked back. At twenty-one, she’d done what her

parents said was the realistic and responsible thing, and what she'd thought was right, but now she wasn't so sure.



THE NEXT MORNING, Margo made her way into work an hour early. She'd been so tired the night before, she couldn't remember how much had been left to do for the decorations. But when she walked into the ER, there was red-and-silver garland on the intake desk and more framing the hallways. The gingerbread archway framed the doorway to the doctor's lounge with a sign she'd never seen that read *Santa's workshop*. Once she walked through and flipped on the lights, she gasped. It was like a winter wonderland and far more intricate than she'd planned.

Colorful lights, icicles hanging from the ceiling, red-and-green checkered tablecloths on the table with pinecones for a centerpiece. The gingerbread archways framed the doorway on both sides perfectly, and not one, but two real Christmas trees, fully decorated, sat on either side of the room. Trees that they hadn't had in the supply closet before yesterday. There was fake snow sprayed on the large windows, and the words *Merry Christmas* stenciled in white.

"Damn, we wanted to surprise you," Dalton said, walking in with Drake and what looked like bags of candy canes.

"You guys did all this?" Margo asked.

"Drake made everyone contribute. He harassed us through our entire shift, singing Christmas carols when we said we were too busy."

Drake had a Santa hat on and looked tired but grinned like a proud peacock. Then stepped under one of the strategically hanging sprigs of fresh mistletoe.

“I’ll take my thank you now,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

She painted on a sweet smile and watched as his eyes grew big as she approached. Then stopped in front of him, snatched the bag of candy canes from him, and pulled one out. She broke it in two and handed him half.

“Thank you for helping. It’s perfect,” she said, turning to look around the room.

“All I heard was ‘Drake, you’re perfect.’ Wow, that’s quite a compliment, especially coming from you.”

“Incorrigible sounds more accurate,” she said, fighting the desire to fall into a playful banter with him. It felt like a slippery slope, or a trap. Up until now, every interaction with him was combative.

“You know, for two people who supposedly can’t stand each other, you’re not fooling anyone. And on that note, I’m heading home to collapse and sleep for twenty-four hours,” Dalton said, walking out.

Then they were alone again.

“You must be exhausted. I never expected you to do all this,” Margo said.

“I’m just sorry I missed your reaction,” he said. “It’s been ten years since our last Christmas together, and I still remember your face when you saw that big tree in your dorm room.”

She spun to face him.

“Almost seems like a lifetime ago, and yet...” The previous playfulness had drained from his face, and he looked hungry, just like he had the last time he kissed her.

Holding her breath, she waited to hear what he would say next. But instead, he shook his head, as if to clear away the memories.

His hand lifted to tip her chin up, forcing her eyes to meet his. “I never should have left you behind.”

Her heart was pounding. He finally said those words she had wanted to hear for so long, but now they almost stung. Like it never had occurred to him to regret leaving her, or come back for her.

“But you did, and we can’t go back in time,” she said.

“No, but if you could forgive me, we could try again.”

She pulled out of his reach. “Try what? We’re both different people now, and you still live in LA. Once you’ve gotten more time with your family, you’ll want to get back to your real life in LA.”

“Stop coming up with excuses, Margo, and tell me you’re not still attracted to me, that you aren’t curious about what would have happened if you’d come to LA or I had stayed here.”

“Our shift is starting. We can’t talk about this now.”

“Fine, but we are going to talk about it,” he said just as the rest of the shift’s residents walked into the doctor’s lounge and oohed about all the festive decorations.



# Chapter Fourteen

## Margo

**A**FTER YET ANOTHER intense shift at the hospital while avoiding being alone with Drake, with his questions tumbling in her mind, Margo was ready for a day off. Her niece's birthday was tomorrow, and she was looking forward to spending time with family. Although she only had one sister, they had fifteen cousins on her mom's side and a dozen more on her father's. Every event and every holiday turned into a family reunion. Growing up with a big extended local family had some blessings, but she was often expected to help her parents wrangle family events.

She just needed to get a good night's sleep, and then she could focus on the festivities. Dalton had relieved her a little early so she could get a few extra hours of sleep, and she didn't have to spend time with Drake at the end of their shift when he liked to pepper her with questions. When had she gone from dreading to see him to looking forward to working with him? He hadn't brought up their past again, but it was like he pressed play on every memory she had tucked away. And they were on repeat now.

It was hard to think about how in love they had been, how connected. The twenty-year-old version of her had thought after medical school they would marry and have started a family by now. But nothing had worked out the way she'd thought it would.

It was pouring rain outside, but she enjoyed the walk several blocks to her condo across from the Potomac River. Cocooned under her umbrella, it was nice to feel the pelting rain hit the clear plastic of the bubble-style umbrella surrounding her. With each step, she left the stress of work behind, but Drake's jet-black hair and firm lips popped into her mind. It was like he

couldn't let her completely forget him. She moved on, created her own busy life, but he was always on the back of her mind, and now, working with him brought everything between them to front and center.

But there was no point in holding onto the past. She chose to stay, and he'd chosen to follow his dream without her. It didn't matter why she didn't go to UCLA with him, it only mattered that he went, anyway. All their choices were like a wall between them, but he was taking a sledgehammer to it. Like they hadn't missed ten years of each other's lives, like there weren't huge hurts standing between them. And what if he really did stay? Would it matter?

Finally home, she kicked off her shoes, and peeled off her damp clothes in exchange for an old familiar T-shirt before crawling into her cozy bed. She fell asleep to thoughts of Drake and lips that knew exactly how to kiss her into oblivion.

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THE SOUND OF a loud knocking woke her, and she jumped out of bed, disoriented. The banging continued as she walked past the Christmas lights she left strewn on the floor days earlier. It was like the knocking was getting more intense.

“Who would dare to knock on my door this early?” she barked through the door.

“It's ten in the morning, Margo,” a distinct base-filled voice said from behind the door.

Drake!

“What the hell?” she said, pushing her mop of thick wild hair out of her face.

“I heard that. Now open up.”

Looking down, she cringed at the ratty T-shirt and boxer shorts she had with mismatched socks on.

“Fine, you want it, you got it.” She whipped open the door only to find a distinct white bag with blue bubble lettering held out in front of his face.

“Maggie’s éclairs?” she said, reaching for the bag.

Then he held up her morning vice, grapefruit juice. He remembered. Taking both from him, she walked away from the open door and moved to sit on the fluffy indigo blue velvet couch that took over her living room, her pride and joy piece of furniture. And not just because it was the only other piece of furniture besides her bed that she splurged on and bought brand new.

Drake walked in and closed the door behind him, and his head swiveled to take in the space. What did he see in the high ceilings, old wood floors, stark-white walls she never got around to painting, and a few pieces of random art hanging?

“Very practical sofa. Is this from a Mary Queen of Scots collection?”

“Say what you want, but it’s luxurious and I love it.” She pulled out a mini designer éclair with specks of gold flakes on the chocolate icing and moaned before taking a big bite.

“Are you kidding me?” she garbled through her bite into the flaky, buttery shell of rich chocolate ganache and creamy sweet center that exploded with the crystals of coconut flavors inside.

“This feels like food porn. Do you want me to let you be alone with that?” Drake asked, walking farther into the room.

Her eyes popped open, and she gulped down her bite.

“This is the strangest dream, but it’s been so long since I’ve had one of these I’m hesitant to let it end,” she said.

“Do you dream about me often?”

“Did you want one?” She held out the bag to him, ignoring his question and resisting the urge to bite her lip, which he knew meant she was lying.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to share, so I already had one.”

He looked around more.

“This is a nice place, convenient to work.” He continued to take in every item in the open-space configuration. “I see you haven’t given up on your guitar.”

“Never. I can play two songs now,” she said before taking a bite of her second éclair.

He laughed and took a seat across from her in the wingback leather chair she’d found at a garage sale, which made him look like a king missing his crown. With his eyes settled on her, she waited for him to explain his unexpected visit.

“Is that my T-shirt?” he asked, studying the weathered and peeling letters.

“No,” she said, attempting to cross her arm over her chest to cover the words.

“Oh, so you were on the Alexandria High School swim team too?”

“What brings you to my home at such an ungodly hour, Drake? I didn’t realize we were making house calls again.”

“I wanted to talk to you outside of work and knew I’d have to just find you. I met up with my brother a couple of days ago.”

She winced and waited for him to continue.

“You came here with éclairs to tell me your relationship with your brother is better?”

“No, I wanted to finish our conversation yesterday.”

She froze, unsure what to say, and then shoved the rest of the decadent éclair in her mouth to stall. Leaning back against the plush material, she let the savory, sweet deliciousness take her away for a moment.

“Margo, I have been under the impression for years that you fell out of love with me, and that was why you didn’t try to come to UCLA. And that you later slept with my brother. But I think it’s time to clarify what exactly happened. I know why you were helping him, and I appreciate it. And that means there are no reasons I should stay away from you. There is only one thing standing between us now.”

This time she did start choking, and he was up on his feet, patting her back until it cleared. Then he opened her juice and handed it to her as he sat next to her. She was having a difficult time being annoyed with him when he was being so thoughtful. Their thighs were pressed together, and his body heat warmed her.

“But first, I need to know if there was any other reason you didn’t come with me to UCLA. I understand the student loans weren’t enough, but why didn’t you ask me to help? We were going to get married. Was there some other reason you didn’t confide in me?” he asked, sitting next to her with his large warm hand still on her back, and her traitorous body was humming with excitement at his touch.

Goose bumps spread up her legs, her nipples hardened, and a low, slow warmth spread through her body.

She stood, needing to get space from his body heat and the raging desire he evoked.

“Can I just go pee and put on normal clothes for this interrogation?”

He stood up as if just realizing she was in her PJs, and his eyes settled on her nipples standing at full attention behind the well-worn T-shirt.

“Yes, sorry. I’ll wait.”

Once back in her room behind a closed door, she laughed at the site of the lines from her pillowcase on her face, her wild frizzy hair, and total nips poking through the dark material. She quickly cleaned up, and a few minutes later, she reappeared to find him looking at some pictures on her bookshelf.

“Listen, thank you for the éclairs, and I’m glad you’ve patched things up with Ian. I didn’t fall out of love with you. I just couldn’t afford to go to UCLA and go to medical school. It was give up my education or give you up. When I told you I couldn’t go, I thought you would choose me.” She spoke so fast her chest was rising and falling, like she’d sprinted by the time she was done.

Drake stood, and she was struck with just how much she missed his handsome face, how much she used to enjoy just staring into those onyx eyes and tracing the lines of his angular face.

“Damn it, Margo, that was important information.”

He closed the space between them and cupped her face in his hands, unable to resist his touch as she indulged in the ripples of lust that sprung instantaneously over her body. A warm heat spread between her legs and nervous desire made her fidget with the pillow on her sofa.

“Why? After everything, does it really matter? We’re different people now. We made our choices, and you never came back.”

“Because I still wanted you, even from across the country. But I thought you cared so little about me that you had slept with my brother, who hated me.”

“He never hated you. He was just jealous, and he took his pain and rejection from your dad out on you.”

“What about you? Do you still hate me?” His thumb ran along her bottom lip, teasing her. Daring her to deny how much she still wanted him.

“No, I’ve never hated you.”

She tried to pull from his grasp, but he tilted her head up to look into his eyes before he brushed his lips gently over her temple.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” she said, her voice strained. Her emotions were teetering on the edge of all tumbling out.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

“You never once considered staying. You just went without me. You left me and our plans behind.”

“I didn’t know you wanted me to stay. You were so cold and indifferent when you said you weren’t going. There was no talking you out of your decision, and it made no sense. I was shocked. After years of us planning and waiting to see if we both got in, you just ditched me. You didn’t tell me you even applied to George Mason as a backup. I didn’t apply to any other programs.”

“Because I knew you were obsessed with UCLA. You made it clear there was no other option for you.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go because of me.”

She shook her head. “No, I never stopped wanting you. I even told my folks I had a plan to take a year or two off to save up and go with you. And they were so disappointed, they knew they couldn’t forbid me, but they begged me to reconsider, and not put my plans on hold for love.”

“I’m sorry you felt like you had to choose,” he said, right before his mouth landed on hers. Flashes of light sparked behind her eyelids, and her hands were on him. They were both starving for each other. He hoisted her up into his arms, and her legs wrapped around him on instinct. His hands gripping her ass made her moan as he stepped back around to sit on the sofa with her now straddling his lap. His arms slid up her back under her shirt to stroke her tender skin before moving around to the front of her body to cup her breasts.

Their tongues collided, and her hips ground over his. In the next minute, he lifted her shirt off, and his warm mouth was licking along her bra line. Cradling his head in her arms, she arched her back to give him better access. He pulled down the thin material of her bra, his mouth closing over her painfully hard nipple just as the sound of her cell phone rang loud. With his face buried in her chest and her arms wrapped around his head, they both froze.

Meeting his eyes, she saw the desire she felt mirrored back in his midnight-black eyes. And regret washed over her.

“Do not even think about getting that,” he grunted with his teeth still clasped over the tip of her nipple.

The pure animalistic lust coursing through her was hedonistic. She wanted to devour him. But the phone continued to ring.

“I have to. I’m on call.”



“Let them call someone else,” he said.

She laughed and tried to stand, but he stood while still holding her and walked to where she could reach the phone on the kitchen counter. Setting her bottom on the edge of the counter, he continued his adoration of her breasts as she picked up the phone.

“Hello,” Margo said in a strangled voice, causing a wicked smile to spread on Drake’s face. With his tongue, he trailed a line from the divot of her clavicle up over her collarbone, along her neck to her chin, where he kissed the side of her mouth.

“Auntie, where are you? Mama says you’re supposed to be here and helping to decorate. The balloons are late, and Nana dropped my cake,” her niece, Sophie, said.

Drake must have heard the child’s voice because he stopped and stood still, but didn’t release her. Taking a deep breath, she checked the clock in the kitchen.

“I’ll be there in about twenty minutes,” she said. Drake shook his head. Yeah, there was no way she was going to make it out of his grasp in that amount of time.

“Hurry, Auntie. Everything is a mess.”

“Okay, love. see you soon.”

She hung up and took a deep breath.

“I have to go,” she said as Drake’s mouth started back down her neck and his thumbs thrummed back and forth over her nipples that continued to confirm he was having an effect on her. What was happening between them?

“You said twenty minutes,” he said, picking her back up and lowering them down onto the couch, with her straddling his lap before capturing her mouth in another pleasure-inducing kiss.

“But I need to get ready and get across town in those twenty minutes,” she said, between kisses.

With one last soft kiss on her lips, he sat back.

“Fine, after all these years, I’m not going to rush this or have you distracted.”

“Who said you could have me?” she said, standing with wobbly legs, but before she could step away from him his arms gripped her around the waist, and he pulled her toward him again.

“Oh, Margo,” he said before kissing along the thin material of her bra while his hand cupped between her legs. He would find how wet she was for him.

Red-hot lust instantly pooled, and his thumb slipped inside her sleep shorts and panties to find her most sensitive spot. As he rubbed the tender area in a steady circular motion, she was his, and they both knew it.

“Now that it’s clear you still want me, I intend to have you over and over again.”

Her mouth was dry, and a cascade of heightened desire spread through her body. She wasn’t even going to pretend or argue. His thumb continued to tease her as her need for him grew. He was playing her body masterfully, as if he’d remembered every place to touch her. Sliding her panties farther to the side, his index finger pushed inside her, and she gripped his shoulders before letting out a moan. Her head fell back, and she gave into the desire pulsing deep inside.

“That’s right, let me give you pleasure, baby. Let me give you everything,” Drake said.

His mouth was kissing her neck, his thumb circling with just the right pressure on her clit, while a second finger pumped inside her, and she tipped over the side of ecstasy within seconds. Her knees were barely able to hold her up as the waves of satisfaction rippled through her.

“Emmm, much better,” Drake’s deep voice said with an approving tone she craved.

Opening her eyes, she met his gaze and couldn’t help but smile.

“I think we just crash landed on creating an unprofessional dynamic,” she said.

“I don’t care. I’m more interested in you than Mercy.”

Alarm bells rang in her ears. If he wasn’t interested in Mercy, then that meant he wasn’t really considering the offer to stay in the plastic surgery center. The director said her selection as the deputy in charge of residents and recruiting could be dependent on her ability to convince Drake to stay. But she didn’t want him to stay, did she?

“But you said you were considering staying?”

With a final kiss on her mouth, Drake let her shorts fall back in place but wrapped his arms around her waist in an embrace.

“I just mean if I stay, it won’t be because of any hospital or offer to stay in another plastics department.”

The implication being he would stay for her?

“Drake,” she started, but he stood and adjusted the thick bulge in his pants that sprung toward her.

“Don’t freak out. I knew something was missing in LA but couldn’t quite figure it out. Then when I got a taste of working in the ER with you, it was clear we had unfinished business. After I found out my mom was sick, it all clicked. All I’m saying is, I would choose this thing between us over any job at Mercy. I don’t want there to be any confusion in your beautiful mind.”

She gulped, unable to deny hearing him say that after all this time felt monumental. But leaving his prestigious job in LA would be much more complicated than just deciding to make a change.

“Thank you for the éclairs,” she said, unsure what to say.

He laughed, and his hand cupped the back of her neck. “Call me when the birthday party is over, or I’ll come find you,” he promised. Then he kissed her again and was gone.

As she leaned against the door, her body hummed with the kind of energy created between two people with chemistry that made everything else in the world seem inconsequential. He could have easily convinced her to be late for the party, but maybe they both needed time to think about what had just happened. Everything was so jumbled in her brain. She couldn’t just sleep with Drake once and expect to get him out of her system, or for it to convince him to stay. And she wasn’t even sure she wanted him to, but it was clear she still wanted him. She was questioning every decision she’d made since the day she walked away from him, but knew for certain it wasn’t something they could change.

But he had said he was sorry he left her behind, and that was something, wasn’t it?

Snapping out of it, she looked at the clock. There was no time to pay attention to her hair or makeup, so after a quick cold shower, she threw on

some jeans, a soft blue sweater, and raced out of her condo. Luckily, her parents' place was nearby in a working-class suburb just outside of downtown. She was very close with her niece. Margo always dreamed of having a big family of her own one day, but that dream always seemed in conflict with her love of medicine. She didn't know how women could balance a high-speed career and kids, and she wasn't convinced she'd want to try.

"Auntie, you made it. Wait until you see what Nana did to fix the cake." Sophie's eyes grew big.

The stitches Drake had used to close Sophie's wound were healing nicely, and there was barely a scar. With more time and the special scar ointment, it was possible there wouldn't be a scar at all.

In the kitchen music was playing, her father was making bite-sized pizzas for the kids, and her mother was throwing multicolored sprinkles at a lopsided four-tier cake.

"Mom, did you really drop the cake?"

Her mom looked up over her glasses and winked.

"No one will notice, you'll see."

The sprinkles did add pizzazz to the cake, she had to admit, but it still resembled that famous building that leans to one side.

"Margo, you made it," her sister said, giving her a quick hug. "Come outside and help me with the balloons, please."

The backyard looked like a kid's oasis. There was a massive bounce castle that commanded one side of the yard, an obstacle course, a relay race, and several picnic tables with snacks and drinks. There was a s'mores station and a few heat lamps set up for the adults with comfortable lounge chairs.

Throw blankets were in a basket near the seats, but the sun was shining and they were having a mild winter so far.

What was supposed to be a colorful balloon archway for the kids to run through was in a tangle on an old sheet.

“See? I need your help!” Izzy said, handing her a picture of what the archway should look like.

Thirty minutes later, Margo had the balloons fixed, and her sister lay flat on her back on the sheet.

“You’re getting too old for this,” Izzy said.

“Excuse me, I’m only thirty-three,” Margo defended.

“Yep, and I’m twenty-eight, and I can admit I’m too old for this. So even if you got pregnant today, you’re going to be an exhausted mom, even more exhausted than I feel now.”

“Who said anything about getting pregnant?” Margo croaked, and the image of Drake’s dark eyes flashed in her mind.

“Exactly my point. I know you’ve always wanted kids, but if you wait much longer, you’ll be too old. It’ll be impossible to manage these birthday extravaganzas. But if you don’t start dating someone, your odds drop even faster.”

“Well, thank you for that depressing observation,” Margo said, standing back as she surveyed her balloon art.

“Or maybe you’re closer to getting your happily ever after than I thought. Maybe whoever gave you that love bite on your neck will give you a baby too.”

Margo’s hand flew to her neck. “What?”

“Are people still leaving marks on necks? I’ve been so out of the game I don’t even know,” Izzy said.

Margo’s cheeks filled with heat. “I need to borrow some makeup now.” She turned and headed for the door back inside.

Laughing, Izzy followed her to her room, where Margo inspected her neck. There was a faint mark, but it wasn’t as bad as Izzy made her think.

“I think it’s just a mosquito bite,” she said.

“In December? Nice try.”

Margo let out a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut before she said his name. “Drake.”

“I knew there was something going on between you two. We could all feel the vibe in that little hospital room. I told you he came back for you! But I thought you hated him for leaving and then hated him some more for coming back to work in your hospital?”

“Hate is a strong word, it’s more like I hate how gorgeous he is and that I still can’t resist his charms even after he left without a look back for ten years,” Margo said as she dabbed a little concealer on her neck.

Her sister leaned forward on the dresser where they both faced the mirror.

“Did you sleep with him?”

“No, he took me by surprise yesterday, asking about everything that happened between us ten years ago and then showed up at my door this morning. But we didn’t have much time to talk.”

Izzy nodded with a knowing grin. “Do tell.”

“I just mean, I had to get over here. But he was intent on kissing me, like he was testing the tension that hangs between us. But I think it’s probably a

really bad idea to even think about hooking up with him.”

“Um, no, it is not. I vote get it on!”

“He’s only here because his mom got sick, and he wanted to play ER doctor. Once he knows his mom will be okay, he’ll be gone.”

Izzy hugged her. “Maybe you two can start over. Maybe he needs to hear a reason to stay, beyond his mom’s health and interest in the ER.”

“Or maybe too much time has passed, but we have that residual attraction of two people that used to have a thing. Like a memory.”

“Only one way to find out,” Izzy said.

The emotions from years ago raced back, and the hollow pain that always settled in her stomach threatened to consume her. Margo rarely let herself think about how different her life could be if she’d gone to UCLA with Drake.

“But I’m also currently his supervisor in the ER, and the hospital wants me to try to convince him to take a job in the plastic surgery department.”

Izzy’s eyes squinted as she studied Margo.

“And?”

“If I get him to agree, it will help my application to serve as the new deputy director of resident students and recruiting.”

“Wow, would you stop practicing medicine?”

“Not totally. I’d be in charge of all the residents’ work and would still see patients, especially with the first- and second-year students. Sorta like what I’m doing now, but I’d have a title and wouldn’t also have to work a ten-hour shift.”



Izzy took her hand. “You could have a life. You’d even have time to date. And if you convince Drake to stay, you can date him.”

“I don’t want to have to convince him to stay, and even if I do, that doesn’t mean he wants to date me or that I want to date him.”

Izzy smirked as she put her hands on her hips. “It’s okay to admit you still have feelings for him and want a second chance.”

“Getting involved with Drake is unprofessional and could jeopardize my application for the new position.”

“When do they decide about this new position?”

“By Christmas.”

“And you don’t want to risk him quitting, so you need to keep him happy.” Izzy smiled. “Two birds, one hot, sexy hookup. He’ll decide to stay, and you two can make cute babies.”

“This is a mess. I’m not going to sleep with Drake to convince him to stay at Mercy.”

“No, but you can sleep with Drake because you two have chemistry, history, and still care about each other. You can have your cake and eat it too. Test the waters with Drake outside of work. Convince him he wants to be a Mercy doctor while at work.”

“That sounds like a recipe for disaster, and if I get the position at the end of the month, then what?”

“Then you take the job, and then it’s up to Drake what he wants to do, but my guess is he’s already plotting how to stay. I think he has realized he made a mistake.”

“He did say he shouldn’t have left me behind, but I think that means he thinks he should have convinced me to go to UCLA. He isn’t exactly the type to second-guess himself, and he’s created an impressive career in LA.”

“Look, don’t get ahead of yourself. For now, just focus on your application, and if you and Drake want to spend time together outside of work, then so be it. It isn’t an all-or-nothing situation.”

Margo flopped back on the bed. Should she let herself have time with Drake? Just because they still had some chemistry didn’t mean it would turn into anything more.

“It’s not just that. We’re two different people now, and all that time between us? It feels like we missed our moment. Like our path together split, and we both kept moving forward and we can’t make them cross again. I think there is too much standing between us.”

“You owe it to each other to find out,” Izzy said, lying next to Margo and squeezing her hand.

Visions of Drake in her apartment, in her bed, flooded her mind. But before she could consider it, the sound of the doorbell ringing snapped her out of her thoughts about Drake. The party started in a flourish of kids, high-pitched chatter, and festive music. Margo quickly became so busy helping the kids with the relay races, making s’mores, and jumping in the moon bounce that she managed to forget about Drake for a bit, but by early evening, his threat to track her down loomed.

He wouldn’t just show up at her parents’ house at her niece’s birthday, right?

She better just check her phone to be safe. A text with an unknown number stared back at her.

*I wanted to make sure you have my number.*

*Got it. Now I know who to call if there is an emergency need for éclairs.*

*I can't stop thinking about touching you.*

*Me either.*

*I'm in surgery tomorrow, but then after our shift I want to see you.*

*Okay, she texted back before she could second-guess herself.*

*Don't freak out.*

His final text produced actual butterflies in her belly, and her cheeks ached from the smile Drake put on her face.

When she looked up, she found her sister standing inside the doorway of her room, watching her with a knowing smile.

“Let me guess. Romeo?”

Margo nodded.

“Well, you should probably get better at lying because you look guilty and very interested.”

Margo needed to figure out what to do about Drake. Even with the new position on the line, she didn't have the strength to stay away from him anymore. Not even if it was for her own good.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Drake

**L**ESS THAN TWENTY-FOUR hours after kissing Margo, and Drake stood freshly showered back in the doctor's lounge before his shift, eager to see her. He'd had what was supposed to be an easy surgery in the plastics department, but it got complicated when the patient's heart rate elevated. He much preferred to be in the ER, where an emergency was expected than in a calm surgery suite.

The pace of medicine and the ER were much more intense than plastics, which he enjoyed. But the long hours weren't conducive to spending time with someone working the same long hours.

*I'll come to your place after our shift.* He fired off a text even though she was only about ten feet and one hallway away from where he stood, conferring with Dalton at the start of their shift.

He could see her let out a deep breath before she responded, *Okay.*

Either she knew he wouldn't take no for an answer, or she was equally ready to pick up where they'd left off. There was only one thing that could stand between them anymore, the fact that he lived across the country. Something that could be changed.

He could see her read his last message before stowing her phone and heading into the hall where he and the other doctors waited to do their rounds. Her gaze landed on him briefly before she started explaining a trauma case they were expecting via helicopter, but it was long enough for him to recognize the desire and uncertainty in them. Maybe he recognized both those emotions because he felt the same way. It didn't sound crazy anymore to move home and try to pick up where they left off. He wanted Margo more

than his job in LA, more than his fancy career, and practicing medicine in the ER felt like where he needed to be right now. Why couldn't he have both? The only question was if she would give him a second chance. But he was going to do everything possible to convince her.

Of course, the next eight hours would be the most grueling and exhausting he had experienced in the ER. There was a gang turf war spreading into Virginia from DC, and victims were coming in every hour as the city grew tense with the outbreak in violence. Drake had already sewn up several gunshot wounds when the director asked him up to her office.

“Dr. Maguire, I realize you're busy pulling double duty today, but the board wanted me to officially offer you a position in the plastic surgery suite. You'll find the offer in your email, but I wanted to stress this is just the beginning of a negotiation. Mercy can't compete with the type of salary or bonus structure a lucrative plastic surgery department in LA can offer, but we hope you will consider the offer.”

“Thank you, Director Kelly, I will.”

He hesitated to voice his interest in the ER. Once he told the hospital, it would make it real. And he wanted to see where things were going to lead with Margo before he accepted any position.

“When do you need an answer?”

“Well, it's not a competitive offer. I think you could take your time over the next week or so to determine whether we can meet you at a comfortable number.”

Drake stood again and shook the director's hand. “Great, I'll give it a look as soon as my shift is over and get back to you.”

“Fantastic.”

Drake couldn't help but smile. He'd secured a position, but maybe not the one he really wanted. He needed to see how far things could move along with Margo in the next week and decide if he was going to stick with plastic surgery or take a leap to work in the ER.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Margo

**I**F SHE HADN'T been so exhausted after her shift, she wouldn't have been able to fall asleep knowing Drake was planning to come over. He was stuck at the hospital longer to finish up with his last patient, yet another stabbing victim. The first half of their shift had been dominated by three gunshot victims and more chaos than anyone should see in one night. She was getting more and more fatigued by emergency medicine. It was common for doctors and nurses to move around just as much as some stayed in one department for life. But she was done with the ER. Promotion or not, she needed a change.

There were several other vacancies in different departments at Mercy. Each would probably involve extra training and a probation period. But it would mean getting away from the chaos of the ER and would give her a chance for a more normal schedule. The deputy director position was still up for consideration, but she waffled on if that was the best next move. It was nice that the director thought she would be a great fit, but that didn't mean it was what Margo wanted. She'd fallen into training the residents by default. She did enjoy it but not as much as helping patients.

She also didn't have the deputy director job in the bag, even if she did convince Drake to accept a job at Mercy. She didn't want to tell him her next job might depend on him accepting a job at Mercy, but then, should she hook up with him? He had left her behind to pursue his career, and for all she knew, he had no intention of leaving his fancy career in LA. But ever since he'd coaxed her body into an explosive frenzy with his hand, she couldn't stop thinking about the next time. The next time when they would have no

interruptions. Even if her head hadn't caught up, her body had already decided to hook up with Drake again.

She didn't want to have to worry about repercussions, anyone else's feelings, or recruiting Drake for a job to help her get a promotion. She wanted to win the promotion because she earned it and then decide if she wanted it. She wanted to hook up with Drake and get him out of her system because she didn't think he would stay in the long run. She wasn't going to think about how much more she wanted with Drake because she couldn't let herself want something she couldn't have. It had been hard enough to get over him the first time. Fantasies of Drake dominated her mind as her eyes drifted closed. She would just rest on the couch until he arrived.

What seemed like moments later, she woke up with a start knocking on her door, and the clock indicated she'd been asleep for about an hour. Standing, she shook off her exhaustion and opened the door.

She was gifted with a freshly showered, smiling Drake, and his dark eyes ran over her rumpled clothes. There were faint circles under his eyes that were overshadowed by his dark long lashes, and dark eyebrows that framed his face. Her favorite feature was the lush thick black hair he usually kept styled just a little long on top. When they dated, she would grip his hair between her fingers while they made love. She could still remember the silky feel.

"You look as tired as I feel." His gruff voice broke the silence.

"I hope you don't plan on having any deep conversation. I'm too sleepy," she said, stepping back and letting him walk into her apartment.

His smile was the stuff of fairy tales: sexy and disarming wrapped into one. Stepping inside, he closed the door behind him.



“I don’t really want to talk right now either.”

She nodded before he stepped into her space, and one of his hands moved up to cup her neck while the other began to undo the hair tie holding her braid in place. His hands wove into her hair, releasing the thick waves.

“I missed you.”

With those three words, her heart broke open, and she could feel the power of how deeply she had needed to hear them. She had missed him for ten years.

Then his mouth was on hers, and she dove into his embrace. Reaching up, she wrapped her arms above his shoulders to pull him closer. One of them growled as his hands cupped her bottom before he effortlessly hiked her up into his arms. Her legs wrapped around his narrow hips, and he walked them farther into her place.

His admission made her putty in his hands. There was no pretense, no denial as their bodies collided. Pulling his T-shirt up, she felt his rigid muscular abdomen and smooth silky skin under her touch. Soft hair tickled her fingers as they moved up along his chest.

“More,” she breathed as he bit her lower lip before sucking on it.

Memories rushed back with promises of pleasure, and their kinetic energy was explosive. She needed him to never stop.

Drake was always a giving lover in bed, but the young man she’d known in college had turned into a more confident version. And she had a feeling she was about to experience an entirely new side of Drake’s desire. Before she could dwell on it, he began to remove her shirt, then slowly peeled off her jeans, leaving her with only her bra and mismatched panties.

“Baby, you’re so gorgeous. I want to sink my teeth into this spectacular, round ass.” His mouth moved over her hip and he gave her a gentle bite while his hands roamed her curves.

“I fell asleep before I could shower. Let me clean up.”

“No,” he said, licking her belly and tasting his way back up her body until his mouth was on her throat. “Why bother when you’ll just get dirty again? Besides, I like your taste.” His breath was hot on her ear.

Hoisting her up again, he walked them to her bedroom down a short hall off the living room and then sat on the edge of her bed. A position that forced her to straddle him. Her breasts pressed against his chest. His hand slipped between their bodies, and his thumb found her clit. With one flick, sparks shattered behind her eyes as she rocked her hips over him.

“You missed me too, I see.”

Her knees trembled as his thumb continued to tease her while his forefinger slid inside her heat. She was blind to anything that stood between them. All she knew was this moment and the sensations he was creating within her.

Desperation.

Lust.

Need.

And something she refused to name pulsed between them. Drake was everywhere, hands, mouth, scent, his body pressed against hers, but she wanted more.

Without even having to ask, he knew what she needed and rolled her onto her back on the bed. His body hovered over her as he leaned back to remove

his shirt, then his scrub pants, until he stood in all his gorgeous, naked, manly glory, and every faded dream she had of him was lit up in color. Sinew muscles, broad chest, sculpted abs, and a dark happy trail leading to his huge, swollen cock. Drake's eyes were the color of coal, and his tongue licked his lips as he took her in, laying with her legs open for him on the bed.

The separation was like sweet torture, but then he was back with his skin on hers. Her knees framed his hips, while she pulled him closer until with one thrust he was hers again. Deep inside, binding them together, in a world where nothing could come between them. Home where he belonged to her, and he owned her body and mind. His body was woven with hers, breaths held as they each took in the moment, eyes searching and finding the same answers. This connection had been missing for both of them.

“Mine,” Drake said in a whisper, before his hips began to move slowly.

One word taking her back in time.

“Yours,” she said, past the knot of emotions in her throat. Her hips bucked up to meet his. She was already close to enjoying the most intense orgasm she'd ever had since the last time she'd been with Drake. If she stopped to think about all her feelings about being with him again, she would get too emotional. So she focused on the pleasure instead.

He took his time coaxing her body into a frenzy before letting her burst into a million tiny pieces. And he didn't stop there. He was insatiable for her, as if he planned to relearn every inch of her body, every pleasure point and taste of her skin, until they both were a satiated heap of entangled bodies. She fell asleep to him whispering what he planned to do to her next.

The next morning, she woke up, energized and hungry, but Drake's heavy breathing proved he was exhausted. Sliding out of bed, she grabbed a few

things, pulled the heavy blackout curtains into place, and closed the bathroom door shut. He could sleep another hour while she putzed around the house. After a long, hot shower, she got dressed and started to cook breakfast. All the mundane steps seemed more enticing with Drake's naked body sleeping a room away.

It wasn't until her dad called. She walked out onto the private patio of her condo and slid to put some more distance between her and Drake.

"Honey, I was checking to see if you're coming over for dinner tonight," her dad said with a hopeful tone.

"Um, not tonight, Dad, but maybe tomorrow?"

"I'm making your favorite enchiladas with verde sauce."

"I actually have a date, but it's a first date so don't get too excited." She knew the one thing her parents wanted more than anything was to see her on any given day off. But they wouldn't give her a guilt trip if they thought she was dating someone special, and in her mind, sleeping with Drake felt like a date. They were vocal about their expectations for her to settle down soon.

"Say no more, but make sure you're being safe. Meet him at the restaurant and don't let him walk you to your car. Oh, and don't leave your drinks unattended."

"Okay, Dad. I promise I'll be super careful and treat my date like he might be a psycho. I'll even bring my stun gun."

"Good idea."

"Bye, Dad, see you tomorrow."

Once she managed to get off the phone, she turned to find Drake standing in the doorway of the sliding glass door.

“You better cancel that date,” his deep voice was scratchy from sleep and sounded even sexier than normal.

He’d pulled on his scrub bottoms but otherwise stood in all his gorgeous, ripped glory. Her reaction time was stunted by the sight of him, and he moved out onto the patio to corner her up against the railing. With both his hands on either side of her, he leaned forward and began his assault on her neck.

“I thought I told you not to get out of bed,” he said against her skin before licking where her pulse throbbed.

The two days of scruff along his jaw tickled and teased her. Then his mouth was on her ear, his lips skimming her throat.

“Turn around, Margo.”

She did as he demanded and looked out at the city. There were other condos and office buildings within sight of hers, even up on the tenth floor of her building. But she wasn’t an exhibitionist.

“Someone will see us.”

“I don’t care.”

His hands smoothed down the sides of her waist to capture her hips before he pressed his bulging desire into her backside. Her body instinctively pushed into him. One hand slid around into the front of her leggings to cup her.

She gasped when his fingers slid inside, his tongue on her throat, before his lips began to suck on her earlobe.

“Emm, yes, baby. You better forget dating anyone ever again. You’re all mine.”

“Okay.” She would agree to anything in his hands.

A horn honking on the street below broke through, and she grasped him from behind.

“Inside, please. I don’t need my neighbors to hear me moaning your name.”

She managed to slip away and head inside, but he was quick to recapture her before she could make it to the bedroom. He pulled off her shirt.

“I thought you wanted to talk today.” Her breathing was heavy.

“Later.” He peeled her leggings down in one fast movement, then ran his hands back up her bare legs and slowly pushed her against the wall. Leaving a path of wet kisses along her skin, teasing her into submission. Next, he spun her to face the wall and placed her hands up as if she was about to be arrested by him. A shiver of expectation ran over her as his warm hands moved over her back and down to cup her full bottom.

“I have missed these lush curves, and I’m not sure I’ll ever get my fill.”

She could hear his voice sink lower right before his mouth was on the small of her back. Then his lips kissed each of her ass cheeks while his hand reached between her legs to stroke her lips, wet with need.

“Drake.” Her knees wobbled as he pulled her hips toward him and pressed his hand on her back to bend her forward more against the wall. She could feel his hot breath on her tender, throbbing slit.

“Hold that thought,” he said before he sunk his mouth into her from behind. With adept skill and his knowledge of what drove her into a needy, quivering puddle, Drake proved he was still a very generous lover. Every inch of her body felt over stimulated as if he flipped a switch on each of the sensors of her body. Then, with a slow tortuous pace, he buried himself

inside her again from behind and drove them both into mind numbing oblivion.

Afterward, she lay collapsed over his chest on the plush rug on her living room floor, wondering how she'd ever lived without him.

“Who was your date with?” he asked in an annoyed tone.

Sitting up, she met his eyes. “Does this count as a date, or are we just sleeping together for old times’ sake?”

“I was hoping to convince you to go out in public at some point with me,” he said, kissing her mouth, and she fought the urge to be annoyed with his non-answer.

But he was cupping her face, and his thumb was stroking her cheek. “How is it possible you’re still single?”

“I could say the same for you,” she fired back.

“Fair. So we either both claim to be too focused on our careers or admit the real reason neither of us has managed to find someone.”

She gulped, and her mouth went dry. Something in his expression and tone made it clear they were not going to dance around what had just happened between them. Drake’s eyes were on her as if daring her to deny she’d wanted him all this time, but she remained quiet.

“Okay, I’ll go first,” he said, pulling the throw blanket from the back of the couch and draping it over them. “I was angry, lost, and shocked when you ended things. I tried to hate you and move on, but instead, I only missed you and compared other women to you. Even thought I might convince you to give us another try after graduating medical school, but then I heard you were dating my brother. So I stayed in California and avoided coming home.”

“It wasn’t my place to tell you, and Ian specifically made me promise not to tell anyone. He had so much shame tied to his sobriety. I didn’t want to risk his health or my license. If you’d only asked me, I could have told you we weren’t dating, but it’s not like we were talking.”

“You’re right,” he said.

“I don’t know if I ever believed we could be like this again. I’ve just been focused on my work since you left. But it’s been a decade, and the same problems exist. You’re in LA, and I’m here. Neither of us are those young college kids. We can’t pick up where we left off.”

“Says who? Margo, I want a second chance. Can you forgive me?”

Sincerity and regret were evident in the rough timbre of his voice. He kissed her cheeks, her nose, her eyelids, and then her mouth with the tenderness she didn’t expect. He pulled her body on top of his, and his strong arms encircled her as tears dropped down to his chest.

“I think I already have. I don’t know if I even blamed you as much as the impossible situation. I was mad you didn’t choose me over UCLA, but you’re right, I didn’t really give you the chance to. I didn’t want you to resent me for asking you to stay or be responsible for ruining your dream.”

“So you pushed me away, and I was too blind to see you needed my help. But now I know what I really need to make me happy, the dream I thought was lost is you.”

She slid her knees up on either side of his hips. “I’m not going to ask you to stay or tell you to go. You have to decide for yourself.”

His body was rigid as he slid his hands down her back and gripped her bottom in both hands, pulling her closer toward him before kissing her. He rocked his hips under her, proving how much he wanted her, and how



visceral their attraction was. A desperate spike of desire for him coursed through her, as if her body had no control. She lifted herself off his lap just high enough to get the right angle before she plunged down onto him with one thrust.

“You can’t deny it anymore. We both want this, we both need this. I’m not saying I have all the answers or it’ll be perfect. Although this feels pretty perfect,” he breathed.

She pushed her hands against his chest to lift herself over him and looked him in the eyes as she sank down again. He bucked up, and she saw literal stars.

“I could never deny this,” she said.

One of his large hands moved up her arm to cup her face while the other pinched and teased her nipples into tight, aroused buds. The combination of adoration and skill to manipulate her body was thrilling.

“You’re mine, and I’m not letting you go this time.” He thrust up.

She couldn’t respond as her mind raced with all her other secrets between swells of pleasure.

His eyes squinted as he brushed his thumb along her lower lip.

“We can be together now and make up for all the lost time.”

She nodded, unsure if he meant they could be together physically or if he wanted to rekindle everything, all their plans. And she was afraid to ask, because then she would feel like she should tell him about the promotion, and the board wanted her to recruit him. Would he even believe her or think she was just desperate for him to stay? It was selfish, but for now, in this moment, she wanted to enjoy him and be with him again.

She couldn't deny herself this time with him. No man had ever come close to being as proficient or thorough in giving her such loving ecstasy, and she doubted anyone else ever would.

Maybe a connection built on lust and half-truths wasn't meant to last, but she was going to take everything she could before it ended.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Drake

**W**HEN DRAKE WOKE up again, the light was shining brightly, and the smell of Margo's notorious cooking permeated the air. His stomach growled as he spied her in the kitchen. She was chopping something with earbuds in, her hips swaying to a beat he couldn't hear. He had about an hour before he needed to be at the hospital again. As his eyes blinked away the sleep, he found his scrubs folded on the coffee table and smiled. Margo was always attentive and thoughtful. She let him sleep after their mind-altering sex and cooked.

Standing from the couch, he grabbed his clothes and decided to get a quick shower. Her head popped up when she caught sight of him with a look of expectation in her eyes as they ran over him with want and sealed their fate.

"Damn," she said. "We're getting dirty again, aren't we?" She pulled out her earbuds and walked around the counter to stand in front of him.

Taking her hand, he rubbed the soft part in the inner side of her wrist. "If we do this in the shower, we can get clean too," he suggested.

With a smile, she took his hand and led him to the master bathroom, where they took turns getting reacquainted with each other under the hot water. She was playful and tortured him with her curves, swatting his hands away before sitting on the cold tile bench with her legs spread for him.

"If you don't hurry, your lunch will get cold, and I made your favorite."

Getting on his knees, he ran his hands up her bare thighs that shook from the expectation of what she wanted from him. Running his tongue along the

same path, it was his turn to tease her until she screamed his name. Which he won when he turned her around and commanded her to put her hands on the wall before plunging into her. They both came apart within minutes.

Being with Margo again felt like a dream he never wanted to wake up from. After they were satiated and took turns soaping each other up, they got dressed and sat down for a simple meal together.

She always was a great cook.

“Is this weird, like we missed so much time together, but some things stayed the same?” she asked.

“Like your moans. I missed those,” he said.

“I just mean there was no pause button, and we both moved on. Outside of bed or the shower, this may not really work again.”

“Don’t forget the couch,” he teased.

She smirked and sipped her water.

“I moved forward because I had to. But I didn’t move on from you, Margo. This isn’t starting over. It’s picking up where we left off with a little missing info.”

“All right, I guess we won’t know until we try, but we can’t advertise it at the hospital.”

“We’re both mature adults. We don’t need to advertise it or hide it,” he said.

“Actually, while you’re assigned to my shift, we kind of do need to hide it. I’m your attending. Even if you are just on loan from LA, it’s unprofessional.”

“I can request to work under Dalton.”

“No, the director will think I’ve done something to scare you off. They really want to convince you to stay at Mercy.”

Drake pulled her into his lap and kissed her neck. “You’ve convinced me, but I think I’d like to try the ER.”

She pulled back to look in his eyes. “The ER? You don’t want to practice plastic surgery anymore? But you’re ‘The One.’ Everyone talks about your talent and new techniques.”

“I wanted to get a feel for the ER before I said anything, but I think I’ll make them a counteroffer.”

“Oh.”

“Unless you don’t want me to work in your ER. Is that a problem?”

“I mean, it could be.” She stood and started pacing. “But I guess once you’re under contract, you would be an attending. You’re obviously overqualified to be a resident.”

He grabbed at her hand and pulled her back onto his lap. “But is it a problem if I get a job in your ER?”

“No, but I think we better keep this”—she motioned between them—“to ourselves until you figure out what you’re doing. Don’t be hasty. I know your mom’s health is a huge factor but just be sure. And in the meantime, while you’re on my shift, we can’t let people know we’re sleeping together.”

He peppered her throat with kisses as she rambled on.

He heard the warning; she was worried he would change his mind. He stopped kissing her neck and studied her. Worry creased her brow.

“But you want me to stay?”

Her eyes met his, and he could see the desire reflected back at him.

“I never wanted you to leave if I couldn’t go with you. But I admit, this all seems like a weird time traveling experiment. We’re the same, but different people in so many ways.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I want to be with you and see where this goes.”

“Good, me too. And that means staying in Virginia. Which I was planning to do. I just have more of an incentive to stay now. I’ll agree to keep things secret until I sign a contract with Mercy, but after that, all bets are off.”

“But when the women at work find out, they’ll all boycott my shifts. They may even try to disappear me if they think you’re off the market.”

He threaded his fingers over hers. “I’m off the market, and so are you. Get used to it.” Leaning over, he kissed her lips while debating whether he could drag her back into bed and still make it to work on time.

“Is there any chance you could align our days off so we can have more time outside of work together, like Christmas weekend?”

“Yes. I was really just trying to give myself a break from you.”

He brushed her hair back off her neck and cupped her face. “I get it, being around you and not being able to do this has been torture.” Her mouth met his in a tender, gentle kiss. “But now you can have me anytime you want me.”

Drake could see the doubt in her eyes, and it stung to know she wasn’t sure she could believe he wouldn’t leave again. He knew there were still quite a few obstacles; securing a job at Mercy in the ER, or at least in Virginia, and getting out of his existing contract in LA. Not to mention convincing Margo that his feelings for her had never changed, and he was staying for good.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Drake

**S**ITTING IN THE waiting room in the oncology department with his brother and his dad was a surreal moment for Drake. He and Ian had seen more of each other in the last month than they did in the last ten years, and they were getting along. They say a crisis can bring people together or rip them apart. It seemed like his relationship with Ian was ripped apart when they were kids, but now, with their mom's illness, it brought them back together.

“Dad, did you know Drake is dating Margo again?” Ian said, breaking the silence.

His dad's eyes found his, and he smiled. “That doesn't surprise me. She's a fantastic doctor. Your mother will be ecstatic, but if things don't work out this time, she might disown you and keep Margo.”

Ian snickered.

“Thanks, man.”

“I mean, if you're bringing her over for Christmas festivities, you may as well let them know now. Besides, this waiting is killing me.” Ian stood and started pacing.

Their mom was having more tests to see if the doctor's surgery and second round of chemo had done the trick, or if she would need to do a third round.

Drake was staring at the large pink metallic bell that hung on the wall across from where they sat. Patients would ring it every time they were told they were in remission, cancer free. It may sound silly to some, but the accomplishment and the goal of beating cancer were compounded by the

euphoria the patient, and likely their family, felt when they heard that bell ring.

When a nurse popped out, they all stood.

“Mr. Monroe, your wife would like you to come back now.”

Their dad moved with surprising agility for a sixty-year-old man, like a cartoon character whose feet were moving faster than their body.

“And then there were two,” Ian said, flopping back down in his seat.

Drake laughed. “This is really torture. I can’t believe how emotional this is, and we aren’t even the ones with cancer.”

Before Ian responded, Margo entered the waiting room, and they both just watched her float past the rows and make her way over to stop right in front of them. She had pink flowers and a gift bag in her hands.

“Hi, you two do not look like things are going well.”

“We’ve been waiting an excruciating thirty-five minutes,” Ian said, raising his voice and looking at his watch. “And they just called our dad back.”

Margo smirked. “Then the hard part is over. They’re probably reading the results now.”

Ian stood and began pacing along the wall where the bell hung.

Margo sat next to Drake and set the gift bag on the floor and the flowers on her lap.

“That was thoughtful of you to get flowers and be here with me. You didn’t have to.”

She leaned over. “I’m actually here for me. Your mom has stayed in touch with me over the years. A card on every holiday and birthday flowers



every year. When she was diagnosed and she asked me to attend a few of her appointments, we grew even closer. I've been bugging her doctors ever since."

"You have?"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

Drake shook his head. "It's like my family already knew what took me ten years to figure out."

"What?"

"You're my better half. You belong in this family." He gripped her hand and wove their fingers together. "Thank you for being there for my brother all those years ago, and my mother. Thank you for being here for me and for you."

Emotions caught in his throat, but before either of them could react, his mom and dad walked back out into the lobby. His mom had a beautiful kelly-green scarf covering her head, since her hair started to fall out after her latest round of chemo. Her cheeks were thinner, and both their parents' eyes were bleary and damp.

Ian had stopped in his tracks, and Margo and Drake stood, but then his mom took a few steps toward Ian. He thought she was going to hug him, but instead she grabbed the rope that hung in the huge pink bell and swung it several times.

Margo cheered, and Ian picked their mom up off her feet to twirl her around. Drake finally reacted and walked over toward his dad and hugged him, before they all joined Ian and his mom in a big family hug, along with Margo.

She beat cancer.



AFTER ONLY A few days of hiding their relationship at work, Drake was over it. Before his shift started, he went to see the director of emergency. His mom was improving from her round of chemo, but he'd spoken to his boss in LA about the possibility of him making a permanent move. They didn't love it, but technically his contract was almost up and due to be renewed in the new year, so he wouldn't be in breach. And they understood his desire to want to be close to his family after his mother's cancer scare. Now he just needed to convince Mercy to hire him for a position in the ER.

"Director Kelly, I'd like to discuss a contract for an attending position at Mercy."

"Dr. Maguire, good morning. I didn't expect you to come to a decision so soon."

She brushed off the crumbs from the coffee cake she was eating at her desk and shuffled her computer mouse.

"To be honest, I didn't either. But I want to stay in Virginia, and Mercy makes the most sense. I just need to talk to you about the position the board offered."

"Yes, yes. As you know, Mercy's plastic surgery department would be ecstatic to bring you on as an attending. As I mentioned, that offer was just a preliminary starting point for an offer."

Drake sighed and sat down across from the man's messy desk.

"No, I mean in the ER. I'm done with plastics."

The director sat back slowly. "Not in the plastics department?"

"Nope."

“Does Dr. Monroe know this? She didn’t mention you were leaning toward a change in which medicine to practice.”

Drake hesitated. He didn’t want to get Margo in any trouble, and he’d only mentioned it a few days ago to her.

“Not officially, but I have been enthusiastic about the work in the ER. Is that a problem?”

“It’s just that Dr. Monroe is being considered for a promotion, and the board was counting on her convincing you to stay at Mercy, in the plastic surgery department. They might think she did too good of a job if she convinced you to love the ER.”

“Margo, or Dr. Monroe, was tasked with recruiting me?”

The director looked surprised by the question.

“Well, anytime we have a nationally recognized elite physician entertaining the idea of working here, it’s sort of all hands on deck. But as your supervisor, yes, Dr. Monroe was expected to do the brunt of the work. She’s after a new position to manage the residents and recruit the best talent, so your accepting an offer will be an added demonstration of her talents.”

An avalanche of disappointment rolled over Drake. If Margo was tasked to recruit him, why didn’t she say that? Maybe it was because a promotion she no doubt deserved was hinging on it. But hiding it meant she didn’t trust him. They had been spending every free minute together.

“Either way, if you’re sure we can’t get you to stay in plastics, I’ll have to take your counter proposal to work in the ER to the board. I assume they’ll still give Dr. Monroe some credit for getting you to at least stay at Mercy,” Director Kelly said.

“Great. I think it would be fair to include some continued trial period if the board feels I need more seasoning in the ER in the contract.”

“I doubt that would be necessary. You’ve had glowing reviews from all three attendings in the ER. As you know, we have the flexibility to design your training program how we see fit. As a practicing physician, you don’t really need an entire year of residency in the ER.”

“The sooner the better. I’ve started looking at properties in the area but want to be sure I have a job.”

The director laughed. “This will be my top priority, Dr. Maguire.”

“Thanks,” Drake said, but he was already moving for the door.

Once he left the director’s office, Drake took the stairs back down to emergency. He didn’t want to wait until he signed the contract to tell Margo. Maybe there was some other reason she didn’t tell him about the possible promotion, but he wasn’t going to hold anything back.

But once he found her in the ER, she was already with a patient, and it looked like Armageddon had struck while he was gone for ten minutes. They must have received multiple cases because Dalton was still there, even though his shift had ended.

“Jump in, Maguire. Multiple car crash victims from a ten-car pileup. More on the way,” Dalton called to him.

He’d have to wait to tell Margo after their shift. It was three days until Christmas, and she’d warned him they would only get busier and crazier cases would arrive. Obviously, she had been through this multiple years in a row.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Margo

**M**ARGO HAD BEEN on her feet for the first six hours of her shift when the director called her to come see him before he left for the holiday. When she finally had a chance to leave the ER for ten minutes, she went right to his office and found him logging off his computer.

“Oh, good. You caught me before I had to go. My husband’s family is arriving from Toledo, and I have to get to the airport, but I wanted you to hear it from me.”

A crushing feeling washed over her.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“I’m not going to sugarcoat this. The board thinks we need to hire an educator for the residents, someone who can create lesson plans and has a background in recruiting.”

She didn’t even realize how she’d hung all her plans on getting that resident position, a chance to reinvent herself, have something for herself. But the board found her lacking. Now what?

“I didn’t get the deputy position?” Margo said, slumping into the chairs across from her desk.

“No. And . . .”

“Oh, it gets worse. Okay, hit me with it,” she said.

“Dr. Maguire countered the board’s offer for a position in the plastic surgery department with a request to work in the ER.”

Margo sat straight up. “He did?” She couldn’t help but smile at the idea that Drake would really be staying. She had wanted to believe him but just couldn’t trust it until he accepted a job.

“You knew he was interested in the ER?”

“Yes, sort of, but I thought it was a passing fascination, and I really didn’t think he would move from LA. I just assumed once his family stuff was sorted, he would be gone again.”

The director looked at her with pity.

“Dr. Monroe, there are only four attending physician positions in the Mercy ER with no budget to add a fifth.”

She met her sad eyes. “They’ll give him my job? My contract is up in a few months, and they’ll want Drake.”

The director nodded. “I advised the board first thing this morning, and they have authorized me to make him a very generous offer. They’re hoping to convince him to move over to the plastics department in a few years.”

“Wow, and did the board express any regret about having to let me go? Won’t they offer me something else?”

“Margo, this is the side of this job I hate. Your talent as an exceptional physician is not to be judged by some board of wealthy businessmen and women. I shouldn’t have to tell you this is their loss or that any ER would be lucky to have you. But the real question is, what do you want? You have been exhausted with the ER and managing the residents. You want to practice medicine but not at the cost of having a life outside the hospital. You can wait for the board to make you an offer, or you can figure out what you want. And go after it.”

“What do I want? I haven’t had a choice since medical school to decide what medicine I want to practice. And even if I choose, that doesn’t mean Mercy will have a position or give it to me?”

“I realize this isn’t the ideal way to come to this fork in the road, but you have a few months to secure your next position. I recommend you choose wisely. I will support and advocate for you for any job you choose.”

She nodded and handed the director a small gift bag; she’d gotten her a gift for Christmas.

“Thank you, Director. I guess I have a lot of thinking to do. I hope you have a merry holiday with your family.”

She handed her a red envelope from off his desk. “Merry Christmas, Margo. I’ll be back in the office on Monday and expect you to have some answers about where you see yourself in the next decade of your career.”

“No pressure.”

After talking with the director, she made her way down the back stairs to the sad little attending office and closed the door. Things were still quiet, but any minute they would probably get hit with another wave of chaos. She was losing her job, and her ex-boyfriend was taking it from her.

As if she conjured him to appear, Drake knocked on the door and poked his head in.

“Are you taking visitors?” he asked.

She’d been staring at the wall where her festive advent Christmas countdown calendar hung.

“Sure, come on in.”

“I had some big news to tell you, but maybe this isn’t a good time,” Drake said, clearly noticing her mood.

“I don’t mean to steal your thunder, but I heard you’re taking a job at Mercy.”

Drake walked into the small space and shut the door behind him.

“I was hoping when I told you, there would be more excitement.”

Margo looked up and forced a smile. “I am really excited that you’re staying in Virginia.”

“But not about me staying at Mercy?”

She laughed. “Well, the thing is, you told the director you wanted to stay in the ER department at Mercy, not plastics.”

“Yes, I told you I’ve been loving the pace and really helping people. Are you worried about us working together long term? Because I think we work great together. You tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

“No, it’s just that there are only four attending physician positions in the ER, and you will make five.”

“And?” He sat on the edge of the desk and waited.

Margo huffed, feeling a little annoyed he didn’t tell her before he went after one of the attending jobs.

“Drake, my contract is up in a few months in the ER, and since you don’t want to practice plastic surgery anymore, the board is going to give you my job.”

“But I thought you were going after the deputy director position, even though you didn’t tell me.”



“Well, it looks like we both were keeping secrets, and I didn’t get that promotion. So I’ll be out of a job in a few months. You have to admit, it’s kind of funny. My ex-boyfriend rolls back into town, hops in my bed, and takes my job from me.”

“Hang on, that isn’t what is happening. If there isn’t a position in the ER, then I won’t take the job. I haven’t signed anything yet.”

Margo slapped her hands down on the desk. “So now my ex-boyfriend will fight my battles? No thanks.”

“Stop calling me your ex. We’re so much more than that now.”

“Are we? Because neither of us told each other about our plans, and it’s only been a week since we’ve been sleeping together.”

“There are other hospitals in the area. I’ll find a job in a different one.”

“Don’t you get it? I don’t want this job anymore and not just because the board has decided you’ll be better at it than me. But now I have to wait to see what scraps of jobs they can’t fill with rockstar physicians that they’ll offer me.”

“Margo, I realize this is a big change, but you’ve been treading water in this position, doing two jobs for Mercy, and if they don’t recognize what an exceptional physician you are, then you need to find a hospital or private practice that will value you. And I’m not moving back to Virginia just to hop in your bed and take your job. I’m moving back to be with you.”

Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. Drake was calling her out on her tantrum, and he wasn’t wrong. But more importantly, he just admitted he was moving back to be with her. She could see the hurt in his eyes. She’d taken out her frustration with the board on him. Even if it was completely unreasonable, she was still mad she was losing her job to him.

“I just need some time to think about what I’m going to do with my career and my life.”

“Then I guess call me when you figure it out, but pushing me away isn’t going to give you the answers, and letting the director or the board decide your next move is not the solution.” Drake stood and opened the door. “You need to figure out what you want, Margo, and then go get it.”

Dread sliced through her. Because she might risk losing her second chance with Drake if she weren’t careful.

# Chapter Twenty

## Margo

**T**HE REST OF her shift, Margo's mind went around in circles. If Drake was staying for her, didn't she owe it to herself to see where things could lead? There was no doubt in her mind she wanted Drake—she always had—but what else did she want for her life? And what if he decided to leave again in a month or a year?

At the end of her shift, she didn't see any sign of Drake. He must be giving her the space she'd asked for. The walk home alone in the cold confirmed she'd been an idiot pushing him away. But maybe she did need some time alone, with no distractions, to think about what she wanted for herself.

She had never planned to practice ER medicine, but when the school offered half off a medical education and a guaranteed job in the ER, it had been too good of an offer to pass up. She was a good doctor, a great one. The thousands of people she had helped over the last ten years proved it. In all the years of school and resident rotations, there was one department she was drawn to.

Oncology. In school as a hungry medical student hoping to change the world, the idea of hunting for a cure for cancer had intrigued her, but in research, there was less time with patients. Then she set that aside for the realities of a job in the ER. Over the last few months, she'd had a chance to get to know some of the nurses and doctors in the Mercy oncology department when she sat with Drake's mom during her appointments or treatments. She would pepper the doctors with questions to the point where they would send her articles from medical journals and upcoming lectures.

Helping patients win battles against the devastating disease would be emotionally draining. But it would also be rewarding in a way the ER wasn't.

Once she got home, she lay on her bed and closed her eyes. What would she do if she were given any opportunity? What did she want?

A job where she could work with patients long term.

A second chance with Drake.

It really wasn't a long list, maybe a vacation somewhere warm. She didn't like the idea of the director or Drake knowing she needed to be pushed into an uncomfortable scenario to stick up for herself or go after what she really wanted, but they weren't wrong. After an hour alone, she was over it and just wanted to see Drake. It was only eight o'clock, and she knew he would still be up. He'd probably gone back to his hotel or over to his parents. She didn't even waste time showering or changing into something cute. She shoved a few things in a bag, grabbed her keys, and whipped open her door to find Drake standing with a huge bouquet and a guilty face.

"I was debating on leaving them or texting to see if you missed me as much as I miss you yet." He spotted her bag. "You're not running away, are you?"

Dropping her things, she reached up and looped her arms around his neck.

"No, I was running to find you and grovel. I need to apologize for being a brat."

"Oh, in that case . . ." His mouth was on hers, and he carried her one-handed back into her place before kicking the door closed.

She jumped off the floor to wrap her legs around his waist, and he dropped the flowers in time to catch her by her bottom.

“I guess I should buy you flowers more often.”

“Yes, please.”

His hands cupped her curves, and his fingers dug into the material of her leggings, sending a rush of heat through her. In two more strides, Drake pressed her against the wall, the cool, hard surface in complete contrast to his warm, muscular form.

His mouth moved to her neck as the tips of his fingers teased the sensitive area between her legs.

“Naked, now,” she said between kisses.

Setting her down again to stand on her own two feet, his hands pulled her leggings down as she ripped off her own shirt. Next, she gripped his jeans at the waist to unbutton them and push them to the floor, squatting in the movement. She ran her hands along his strong legs, thick muscular thighs, and then gripped his swollen cock as she stood again in front of him. His shirt was gone, and they stood facing each other, chests heaving, eyes searching.

“I’m so glad you didn’t leave me alone.”

“Well, I probably just need more remedial training. I prefer to be told what to do when it comes to you.”

“I see. Maybe if I give you step-by-step directions you have to follow, you can perform at your best.”

“It’s worth a try,” he said, as his lips pulled into a wicked smile.

“First, you’re going to need to pick me back up.”

As if she were light as a feather, he lifted her back up and her legs encircled him again.

“Press me against the wall like before.”

He did as directed, and she gasped now at the feel of the cold against her bare back, but then his hot mouth was on her neck. She still had her bra and panties on, but it only added to his teasing. As his thumb ran across her nipple through the thin material, it budded into a tight tip under his attention.

“What next?” he asked between kisses along her throat.

His mouth dipped lower, and he caught her aching nipple in his teeth, then bit down before letting his tongue soothe the tight bud. She reached between them to pull her panties to the side and could feel him twitch.

While still holding her up by her bottom, he pulled back enough to angle himself to slowly slide along the length of her slick heat.

“You are going to pay for that,” she breathed and used her knees to squeeze his hips as she lifted herself up with one bounce, taking all of him in one fell swoop. He bucked up, pushing her hard against the wall and gritted out her name, which she barely heard over her own cry of pure pleasure. They stayed there, him deeply seated, and her legs wrapped tightly around his waist. Their chests heaved as she met his eyes, and he eased in and out with luxurious strokes.

Much later, when they were both done catching their breaths, Margo lay on top of Drake with their bodies pressed together, his fingers in her hair, running through the wild mess of knots they’d created. With her ear pressed to the center of his chest, she could hear his heart beating steadily.

“Did you figure out what job you want to go after, or did you just miss me?” Drake said.

She smiled.

“I have an idea of where I’d like to land, but I’m not sure it’s really feasible. I’d rather talk to the director on Monday before I get my hopes up.”

“I get that. I’m here to support you in any way, and I won’t take the ER job unless you’re sure you don’t want it.”

“What if I said I wanted to do Doctors Without Borders?”

Drake rolled her onto her back and hovered above her, his eyes searching hers.

“I’d say let me go with you, please.”

“You would do that?”

Drake’s arms balanced his weight above her, his hands were in her hair, thumbs on her cheeks, and a small smile pulled at his mouth.

“Let me be very clear, Dr. Monroe, I don’t want to be separated from you ever again. I may have been a fool for ten years, but that guy is gone. I’m moving back for you whether I take that job at Mercy or not.” He kissed her lips with a worshiping touch. “Margo, I’m in love with you, and I think I always have been.”

The swell of tears slid down the sides of her face.

“I’ll do whatever it takes for us to be together,” Drake said.

“Who knew all I had to do was mention a third-world medical position to get you to profess your love for me?”

“You minx,” he said with another kiss.

“I love you too, by the way. I never stopped, and I never will,” she said.

“Merry Christmas to me.”

“To us,” Margo said.

“Oh, that reminds me.” In the next moment, Drake was peeling himself off her and jumping out of bed.

He strode back into the living room naked and then returned with his pants in his hand.

“That reminded you, what?”

“An early Christmas gift I found you,” Drake said, climbing back onto the bed.

There was a look of genuine mischief and happiness shining in his dark eyes.

“What did you do?” she said.

But instead of answering, he held out a small square box for her. It was black with a red-and-green bow.

She was afraid to accept the box, much less open it. Only a few objects were given in little boxes.

His grin grew bigger, like a child waiting to see someone’s reaction to something they made.

She hesitated, but he held the box out with pride beaming from his handsome face. She accepted the box and held it just out in front of her.

“Open it,” he prompted.

Slowly she lifted the lid of the box up, squeezed her eyes, and then resigned herself not to freak out if it was jewelry. Inside the box lay a simple metal keychain and two thick keys.

“Keys?”

“I found us a house. It’s a rental but I want to buy it if you’re willing to live with me. I know it’s soon, and I’m not saying you have to move in right away or get rid of your place. But since I’m staying, I’ll need a place to live.”



“Oh, wow. A house. How did you even have time to look at houses?” She picked up the keys and felt the weight of them.

“Well, I already knew the area I wanted to live in, so I just went after the first house that came available. You know my cousin is a Realtor so she’s been keeping an eye on the area. This home was available to rent immediately, but they are also entertaining offers.”

Her eyes shot up to meet his. “The Breakers?”

There was an older neighborhood with a beautiful winding road that ran along the Potomac River in Alexandria, where homes had docks for private boats and big backyards. They used to drive down that road when they dated in high school and talk about how they would live in one of those homes one day. The houses were big with weathered shutters, picket fences, and manicured lawns.

He nodded. “I hope you like it, 1707 North Breaker Ave. It can be ours.”

“Ours?”

He pulled her into his arms, and she buried her face in his chest as emotions swelled.

“I know it seems fast, but I don’t want to risk being unclear about what I want. I’m staying in Virginia. I want to be with you, and I don’t want to spend a single night away from you.”

More tears spilled down her cheeks, and she let the emotions pour out. Drake’s warmth surrounded her as he pulled her into his arms again, his hands rubbing her back. He was putting it all out on the line, offering her everything she always wanted with him.

“Don’t cry, babe. I thought you would be happy.”

“I am. It’s amazing. It’s just hitting me, I guess. Ten years apart, and we fall right back into each other. You’re taking a job at Mercy, buying a house in our dream neighborhood, and you still want me as much as I want you.”

He wiped the tears from her cheeks. “We can have everything we always wanted and more.”

She nodded, and then his mouth was on hers and she stopped thinking about what job she would take and just let herself feel. This man that she had known and loved half her life was back and offering her everything. She owed it to herself to see where things would go. And to let herself enjoy it.

Pulling her knees up on either side of his hips, she kissed him like a woman starved.

“Maybe we should keep this condo for our love shack,” Drake said.

“Less talking and more loving, please.”

“Yes, boss.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Drake

**T**HE NEXT MORNING was Christmas Eve, and they woke up late in a cocoon of rumpled sheets. After making the kind of sumptuous love that left no question on how you felt about each other, Margo packed as much as she could in her largest suitcase because Drake wanted them to stay in the new house for Christmas. They both had the next two days off, and it would be the first time they officially announced their relationship to both their families.

They were spending the evening with his family and then Christmas Day with Margo's. On the drive to the new house, Margo fiddled with the keys he'd given her. She never would have believed a month ago when he appeared in her ER that they would be saying I love you and driving back down the same road they used to imagine where they would live together. And now they would.

"Are you freaking out right now?" Drake asked in a whisper as he turned down the wide two-lane road that ran along the Potomac River. She caught a glimpse of the water in between the huge homes.

"Maybe a little." His hand gripped her thigh. "But not in a bad way. More like an 'I can't believe how much has happened in the last few weeks' way." His deep laugh filled the warm car, and she realized it wasn't the change that was causing her heart to almost ache. It was joy. Unadulterated joy to be with him and know that he would have her back, and she would have his.

He slowed the car as they approached a white brick two-story home with gray shutters and a stone circular driveway. He stopped in front of the home and parked.

“Welcome home, love. I hope you like it.”

The window fogged from her face pressing so close to look up at the black trim of the angular roof.

“Home.” She tested out the word.

“Come on, we have a few hours to get familiar with the place before we head to my parents.” He hopped out and came around to open her door, then grabbed her smaller bags. “I’ll get the rest after I get you inside.”

There were five steps up to the double slate doors, and Drake set the bags down.

“You want to do the honors?” he asked.

Pulling the keys back out of her pocket, she unlocked the door and began to twist the spindly handle when her feet were lifted out from under her.

“Drake, what are you doing?” She yelped as he picked her up to carry her inside.

“I’m carrying my future over the threshold,” he said and pushed the door open so he could carry her inside.

The house was undeniably posh and modern inside with cathedral ceilings, a large staircase to the left of the entry that led up to an open hallway. Drake set her down on the herringbone wide light brown floors as she took it in. They were on an elevated foyer that looked out into a massive family room with a fireplace as tall as her and a wall of glass doors with a view of the yard and river beyond. In the corner of the room was a massive Christmas tree with white twinkly lights.

“You put up a tree?”

His arms wrapped around her, and his chin settled in the crook of her neck.

“It was here, but I did the lights. I thought if you were even a little hesitant about moving in, the tree would be the final convincing detail.”

She nodded. “Smart thinking.”

“I thought you might want to decide on ornaments for our first Christmas back together.”

Turning to face him, she looped her arms up around his neck. “Thank you for coming back and still loving me.”

“Oh, babe. I’m just sorry we lost those years apart.”

Brushing her lips over his, she didn’t want to dwell on the time apart. “Me too, but at the same time it feels like we ended up exactly where we were supposed to be.”

“Like magnets, we were always going to find our way back to each other,” he said as his hands slid down her back to swat her bottom. “Let me give you a tour before I get too distracted.”

“Is that a dock in our backyard?” she said, taking his hand to walk down into the living room and testing out the idea of the house being theirs together.

“Yes, we also have a boat and a few kayaks. The house comes fully furnished, but we can replace anything you don’t like.”

“Isn’t this house a little big for us as a starter house?”

Drake laughed. “It won’t be just the two of us for very long if you still want that big family,” he said, squeezing her hand.

Margo gulped, and her ovaries did somersaults of joy. She wanted babies but didn't expect the option to come up so quickly.

"I do. Just not right away. I need to have you all to myself for a while longer," she said.

Drake's flagrant smile spread wider. "You just tell me when. I'll be ready."

The living room was cozy with a dark gray sectional, large bookshelves tucked behind the tree, and off to the left, she spied a gourmet kitchen and pulled on Drake's hand.

"Wow, you found a home with the kitchen of my dreams."

A massive island in white-and-gray swirled marble commanded the space. There was a large steel hood above a six-burner stove and gray cabinets accented with gold handles. Beyond the kitchen, there was another wall of windows.

"Time to check out the master bedroom," Drake said, leading her up the stairs.

She only had enough time to take in the plush carpet and glimpse the gorgeous views before Drake had her on her back on the huge bed.

"Maybe we don't need to make it to that party," Drake said, as he pulled off her jeans.

"You have several hours to get your fill, then we'll make an appearance. It's Christmas Eve, and we have a lot to celebrate."

"You're so good for me," he said.

"Don't you forget it."



EVEN AFTER ARRIVING an hour late to Drake's parents' Christmas Eve party, no one noticed because the house was full of dozens of family members, friends, neighbors, and several prominent local and state politicians.

"I didn't realize this was going to be such a big event," Margo said, gripping Drake's hand as he led her through his childhood home, which was definitely a far cry from the working-class neighborhood she grew up in.

"I didn't either."

Every few feet, they were stopped by one of Drake's cousins, an aunt or uncle, and everyone remembered Margo. It was such a warm welcome that any nervousness she had around so many people quickly disappeared.

They found Ian in one corner talking with his cousins, Finn and Conner.

"What is with all the Real Housewives of NoVa here tonight?" Drake asked Ian.

"Apparently, Dad has a big announcement to make," Ian said.

"Any idea what that is?" Drake asked.

"I'm guessing retirement," Finn said.

"No way. I think he's running for some public office. Look at all the extra security and politicians here," Conner said.

"Mom is still recovering, would he really do that?" Ian said.

"I think we're about to find out." Drake spotted their mom standing next to their dad in a flattering red dress with a big smile.

She waved them over.

"Come on," he said to Margo.

"Oh no, I'll stay here."

“No way, you’re stuck with me now,” Drake said, gripping her hand tight.

“Thank you both for coming. Your father just wants to make a quick announcement,” their mom said before she gave Margo a big hug. “Merry Christmas, honey.”

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Maguire.”

“I feel like I got so many gifts this year. My boys are both home and talking, cancer free, and maybe a wedding in our future?” his mom teased them.

Ian started laughing. “Welcome to the family, Margo. There is no getting out again.”

“Mom, can you not freak my girlfriend out? I just convinced her to move in with me. Give me another month or so to convince her to marry me,” Drake said.

Before Margo could respond, Drake’s dad was using a microphone to get everyone’s attention.

“Merry Christmas, everyone. Thank you for joining us this year for our annual holiday party. We have so much to be grateful for.”

The crowd cheered.

“I want to thank my beautiful wife for throwing yet another amazing festive party and putting up with me for another year.” Their mom stood next to their dad and smiled. “And we wanted to officially announce that I’ll be running for governor of our fine state of Virginia. This will kick off our campaign.”

There was an initial hum of surprise before the crowd all cheered.



“I hope we can count on your support for the campaign, and I’ll expect the Maguire clan to show up in force throughout the next year.”

“Here, here,” several of Drake’s uncles called out from the crowd. The Maguires were a close-knit lot and quite large, considering his father came from six brothers, all married and all with several kids. At one point, Drake had at least twenty cousins.

“All right then, let’s all raise a glass; may we all be blessed in the next year, that our families stay healthy and strong, and that we forgive and appreciate each other. To the future and to the state for lovers.” The crowd cheered at Mr. Maguire’s use of the state’s slogan.

Margo didn’t miss Ian’s grimace. “Well, this is exciting,” she offered.

“I just hope he doesn’t expect us to be out on the campaign trail,” Ian said.

“Oh, I have no doubt, they will both expect us to participate, and I’m sort of looking forward to watching you in that setting,” Drake said.

Ian pulled on his bespoke black suit jacket he wore over a stark white dress shirt with no tie. “I can clean up just as well as you, pretty boy. I just choose not to.”

“Like I said, it’ll be fun watching you squirm and be on your best behavior. Snark is not going to help win over voters,” Drake said.

“No, but as soon as the women of Virginia get a look at the governor elect’s gorgeous sons I have a feeling your dad will have sold-out crowds,” Margo said.

“I was thinking the same thing, Margo,” Mrs. Maguire said, rejoining them. “And with Drake taken, that will leave a lot of eyes on you, Ian.” His

mom winked before a guest stole her away into an excited conversation about the campaign.

Drake just laughed as Ian's frown deepened.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Margo

**A**FTER WHAT COULD only be described as a magical Christmas with Drake in their new home, Margo was back at the hospital first thing Monday morning and eager to see the director to discuss her future. But first she wanted to speak with someone else. Stepping off the elevator on the fifth floor, she entered the oncology department.

“Dr. Monroe, I didn’t expect to see you again so soon since Mrs. Maguire is in remission,” the desk nurse said softly. “Happy holidays.” She held up a tin of homemade holiday cookies.

“Happy holidays,” Margo whispered, aware there were patients within hearing distance that might not share their enthusiasm while getting cancer diagnosis or treatments. “Is Doctor Stone in today?”

“He is. You can head on back. He’s probably eating too many cookies too.”

Margo made her way back down the soothing blue hallway and knocked on the last door, where the head of the department’s office sat. The door was open, and she knocked on the frame.

“Margo, come on in.”

“Dr. Stone, happy holidays. I was hoping to catch you for a quick career chat.”

He clapped his hands like a child about to open a gift when he already knew what was inside.

“I was hoping you might say that because I happen to know your contract will be up this summer in the ER.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I make it my business to know when doctors I admire will be up for renewal. Have a seat.”

She sat on the edge of the chair across from his desk, unsure how to approach this conversation.

“I think I’d like a position in the oncology department. I realize I may need to start in a residential learning position again, but I’m more than willing to do what’s needed to learn.”

Dr. Stone smiled. “Most days we work an eight-hour shift, but we do have weekend and on-call hours. I know you’ve seen a lot of traumas and had patients die, but it can be very emotionally taxing here, in a different way. You’ll have more time with your patients and will develop bonds. And then you’ll lose some, and it will make you angry and sad. It’s important to understand that and be prepared to cope with it.”

Margo nodded. “I’ve thought about that a lot, and I’m hoping the successes from those we can save will help me cope with the losses. Knowing we tried all we could to help and maybe contributing in some way to one day beat cancer seems like a lofty cause. A meaning in my medical career that was missing in the ER.”

“Very good. Then I will send you a job offer, and once you pull together the requisite certificates and sign, we’ll send it up for the board’s approval. I don’t expect any pushback. They’ve always approved all my choices. Oncology has difficult positions to fill, but once we do, doctors tend to never leave.”

Margo tried not to let her excitement burst out. “Just like that? You’ll give me a job?”

“Dr. Monroe, even if I had not already asked about your track record as an attending in the ER, I would be offering you a position based on your engagement over the last few months in Mrs. Maguire’s care. You served as a calm, insightful, but curious advocate for the patient. Exactly the type of talent we need in oncology.

Margo popped up out of her seat. “Thank you, Dr. Stone. You won’t regret this decision.”

He stood and extended his hand.

“Thank you, Dr. Monroe. You’ll see a contract and offer from me later today.”

Walking out of the quiet space holding back a big smile, Margo made her way down the stairs to the ER, where she spotted Drake walking into the doctor’s lounge. Bursting through that door, she noticed several residents and nurses taking advantage of the final few minutes of their shift change. It was one of the busiest times for the staff, and she didn’t care. She walked right up to Drake and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Oh, hey. I missed you too in the last ten minutes,” he said before kissing her openly in front of everyone, and she didn’t care.

Not even when they received several whistles and laughs.

“We won’t have to work together much longer,” she said in his ear.

“Does this mean Dalton will start bossing me around?”

“No, because you’re going to accept that job offer, and I’m going to accept a different one in oncology.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, but since I’m moving in, you’ll still see plenty of me.”

His mouth landed on hers, and she lifted one foot like the women do in the movies as he swung her around. Their colleagues all clapped.

“Then we can live happily ever after,” Drake said.

“Yes, please, Dr. Maguire.”

**~The End.**

# Epilogue

## Six Months Later

**M**MARGO COULDN'T SEE anything through the scratchy green fabric of the blindfold someone made out of an old scrub T-shirt. She gripped the stick she was handed and swung again. The loud *thwack* indicated she'd hit the mark, followed by the spilling of candy and the crowd cheering. Pulling down the eye cover, she blinked to find the colorful piñata in the shape of a cupcake split in two.

Drake smiled and took the stick from her. "Very vigorous and accurate strikes, love."

"Geez, Monroe, I didn't even get a turn. Isn't this supposed to be a dual going away party?" Dalton whined with a big grin.

"I still can't believe you're moving back to Virginia Beach tonight," Margo said, fighting the swell of emotions because he would be so far away.

"I warned you not to get too attached when we met three years ago, Monroe," Dalton said with a fake scowl before putting his arm around her shoulder.

Margo hugged him tightly. "But you're my best girlfriend and work husband wrapped into one. Who will I vent to?"

"Um, what about me, your actual boyfriend, and up until today, we worked together," Drake said, playfully trying to pry them apart.

"You'll never be able to replace me, Maguire. The best you can do is make an agreeable stand-in and then buy a vacation condo on the coast so you can come visit me."

"That's a great idea," Margo said, looking to Drake for agreement.

Drake pulled her into his arms. “As if I could deny you anything. Why don’t we all get settled in our new positions before we plan our first reunion? But I am definitely going to be up for several trips especially if you can get us on that SEAL compound.”

Dalton nodded. “I’ve got money on you heading back to plastics in a year.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll try not to outshine you as the new ER attending my first week. I’ll let your memory linger for a bit,” Drake said.

“I think you’ll both do great, and I plan to bask in the calm banker’s hours I’ll be keeping in oncology,” Margo said.

If someone had told her she had the chance to be this exceedingly, gloriously happy even a year ago, she wouldn’t have believed them. After a few too many pieces of cake and saying goodbye to their colleagues in the emergency department, the three of them exited the hospital onto the busy city street.

“We’ll see you at the beach,” Margo said, giving Dalton one more fierce hug. “Remember what we talked about. Everyone deserves a second chance, even you.”

“See you in the sand and the surf,” Dalton said, squeezing her back.

He and Drake gave each other manly hugs, and they watched him walk away. He was flying out that night. Dalton had always seemed like he was holding onto something from his past, and she’d assumed it had to do with his time as a Navy SEAL. But now that he was headed back to his hometown to take over as the head of their emergency department, she couldn’t help but wonder if he had unfinished business too.



“And then there were two,” Drake said, gripping her hand. “Come on, we have the entire weekend off to celebrate before we both start our new jobs.”

Burrowing into his side, they walked down the sidewalk to the parking garage to the shiny SUV Drake had gifted her.

“Don’t forget we have your dad’s event tomorrow, and what is that meeting about beforehand? Do we really need coaching on how to ‘act’ like a supportive family?”

Drake groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“I guess your dad doesn’t want to take any chances we’ll say or do the wrong thing. I mean it is super impressive he’ll be running for governor of our state. That is a big deal.”

“The fact that you’ve become one of his biggest supporters is quite amusing, but just wait until you meet his campaign manager before you sign us up for any more events.”

“I’m really just into it for the glamor and the swag,” she said. “Do you think we’ll get to meet President Cruz? Maybe she’ll make me her personal physician.”

“I’m pretty sure you have to be in the Navy for that job, but I agree it would be pretty cool to meet her,” Drake said. “It’s also going to be extremely entertaining to watch Ian squirm.”

“Your poor, suffering brother. At least he and your dad have made some progress?”

“More like agreeing to tolerate each other.” Drake opened the passenger side for her and waited until she was buckled to close the door. Then he got in on the driver’s side and headed out of the city to their home.

“It’s better than nothing, and maybe this process of supporting your dad will bring them closer together.”

“Maybe. Now enough about them. What shall I do to you first when we get home?” Drake’s hand reached over to grip her thigh before sliding all the way up to cup her between the legs.

“Husband, you’re driving.”

“Multitasking. Besides, I like to hear your breath hitch like that.”

“You like to tease me,” she breathed as his fingers stroked her through the fabric of her scrubs.

“Emm, yes. That too.”

By the time they pulled into their driveway, she was ready to rip off his clothes and did the second they were inside the garage and out of the car. They didn’t even make it into the house before Drake was bending her over with her hands on his sports car. The metal was cold beneath her hands as his warm body pressed into hers. But the desire between them was too intense, and his pace quickened. She’d worked her last shift, and they hadn’t seen each other for ten hours. He was hungry for her. Pushing her hips back to meet his strokes, she smiled at the sound of his guttural moan.

She would never get enough of him but enjoyed trying.



“WHAT IN THE hell does that even mean? ‘Smile with earnest and meet people’s eyes?’” Ian said, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear him.

Margo covered her laugh with a cough, but the eagle eyes of Ms. Jax was already settled on him from across the large coffee table in his parents’ sitting room.

They were meeting with Mr. Maguire's campaign manager and her staff. Ms. Jax was a political guru and had worked on President Cruz's campaign, which got her elected as the first female president. It was said politicians didn't choose her; she chose them. She was the closest a politician could get to a "sure thing" and had worked on every successful campaign for the last twenty years. Members of Congress, presidents, and governors that had all won their races when they had Ms. Jax on their side.

"Mr. Maguire, I need to know if this is going to be too much for you here and now. We can't have any member of the family giving a half-baked effort. I need to be sure you're going to project genuine support for your father's bid for governor."

All eyes in the room bounced back to him and Ian sat up a little straighter, but he didn't cower under her scrutiny.

"I wouldn't have come today if I wasn't prepared to support my father. I just don't see why we need lessons in smiling or 'acting like a family,'" he said, reading from the document Ms. Jax had passed out to each of them. "We are a family."

"You might be surprised how many political families can't stand each other, Mr. Maguire." Her eyes narrowed again. "Any skeletons will come out, so we need to be prepared and address them now."

Ian looked to his mother, who sat holding a cup of tea, wearing an impeccable pants suit that looked like it belonged in a modern spin on the Jackie O collection. Mrs. Maguire smiled and winked at Ian. Although Ian and his father had never been on the same page, he was always close with his mom, and Ian wouldn't do anything to upset her.

Ian nodded. “After practicing family law, I don’t think anything would surprise me about political families, but up until now, we haven’t been one. Just the normal kind of sibling rivalry and daddy issues here.”

“Very well, then, if you and your brother are in agreement to support your father and mother in this endeavor, I believe your father will win this race in a landslide. My plan is to get as many of the Maguire’s involved and give Virginians a bird’s-eye view of what a spectacular family you are.”

“Have you spoken with our extended family? I’m not sure all our cousins will want to get too involved,” Drake said.

“They’ll all be attending tomorrow’s gala where we really kick off your father’s campaign officially with a big fundraiser, and we’ll get to see you both in action.”

Ian and Drake looked at each other, and Margo couldn’t help but feel excited and laugh at the brothers’ nervousness.

“You guys will be fine. We just have to all stick together, and we won’t tell anyone about all our dirty secrets,” Margo teased.

A young woman with thick glasses, her hair tucked back in a bun, and a dowdy sweater sitting in the corner smirked but then covered it with her clipboard. She was one of Ms. Jax’s assistants.

Ian’s back stiffened. “Is it really necessary to air all our dirty laundry to strangers?” he asked, looking at his father.

“No, son, we can have a private discussion with Ms. Jax after this,” his father said, looking at the formidable woman with the Maguire stare that made it clear there was no room for discussion. She may be the political guru, but their father was a seasoned criminal attorney and had led the largest county in the state’s legal team for the Commonwealth of Virginia for the last

ten years. He was no slouch, and he had just drawn a line in the sand for this political race.

“Mr. Maguire,” the woman said as her eyes swiveled between Ian and his father. “If you think I have not uncovered your time in rehab, your work with the juvenile delinquents, and your bad boy status, then you have underestimated me. And your opponents.”

Margo’s eyes grew huge, and she bit her lower lip in fear that the room would explode in defense of Ian. However, everyone sat completely still.

“If you think I’m ashamed of my past, you’ll be disappointed,” Ian said. “But I won’t subject my mother to any smear campaign against my father for my shortcomings.”

“Agreed, but we will be ready if someone else should uncover your history, and we won’t make excuses or hide from it.”

Ian huffed. “I am not going to do any apology tour or be a poster boy for rehab. My reputation and previous stint in rehab shouldn’t matter to voters. I’m not the one running for any office.”

“Of course not, but to homemakers deciding who to entrust with their tax dollars, and national security, it matters if your father provided a loving home as well as he ran the county criminal code.”

“And what is your advice on this matter, Ms. Jax? Do we face it head-on or wait until it’s unearthed to address it?” Mrs. Maguire finally said.

Ms. Jax smiled. “Very good question, Mrs. Maguire. I always find that it’s best to see if the other party can dig it up, but we’ll be ready. Ian had a wild youth and tough time in college, but that was almost a decade ago and he’s been sober ever since.”

Then the woman’s eyes landed on Ian.

“Correct?”

“Yes,” Ian said with gritted teeth.

Margo let out a breath she'd been holding the entire time, and her hand snaked under the table to grip Ian's, which was in a tight ball on his thigh. They were a united front, but if his father was going to be in the spotlight, all their family secrets were up for public consumption.

“Now, Dr. Maguire, are you planning to just live with Dr. Monroe, or can we expect you to be putting a ring on it soon?”

Ian laughed.

Margo gasped.

And with a sly smile, Drake stood, buttoned his suit jacket and sunk to one knee.

“Dr. Monroe, what do you say we let this cat out of the bag?” Drake retrieved a large, solitaire diamond and slid it back on Margo's left ring finger before kissing her.

“We were going to wait to tell you all in private, but now seems like as good a time as any,” Drake said once he was back on his feet.

His parents congratulated and hugged them both while Ian clapped.

“Show-off,” Ian said but then gave Margo a kiss on the cheek.

Drake had proposed for months, and finally, one night while they were in bed, in their gorgeous home, she'd said yes. He'd had the ring ready and waiting.

“Well, that was tidy. Now we'll just have to make sure we have Ian's image squared away,” Ms. Jax said.

Two hours later, Margo found Ian outside in his parents' backyard looking out at the water.

"Are you okay? You know you don't have to participate in this. You could just attend one or two events and be the successful public servant son that is too busy."

Ian nodded. "I could, but I told myself I wasn't going to take out my skeletons on my family anymore. It only destroys me in the process."

"Very mature of you," Margo said, hooking her hand through his arm.

He laughed. "I will play the perfect son for the next six months until my father is elected governor, and then I can skulk back to my bachelor pad."

"That's probably what Ms. Jax will want to cover next." Margo cleared her throat and put on a hoity-toity tone. "Now, Ian. We can't have you out on the town with every blonde socialite you stumble across. The gorgeous playboy is an overdone role for a politician's sons. We'll need you to secure a faux girlfriend and make her a schoolteacher."

Ian scoffed. "That will be a deal breaker for me. I'm not going to be settling down or having any fake relationship for a photo op. But those socialites sound fun. Where do I meet them?"

"Oh boy, you are going to be the toast of the town at these events, and I'll be too busy keeping the women away from your brother to really get to enjoy it."

"I guess I'll just have to fall on that sword," Ian said.

"But you can't sleep with any of them. You're much better off finding a woman to be your political faux girlfriend for the duration of this campaign. You can't give the opposition any chance to get close to you, and let's face it, a beautiful woman is exactly the kind of bait they'll use."

“Damn, serpico. You really think they’ll throw gorgeous women at me, in hopes that I’ll spill my guts to a complete stranger?”

“I think they’ll not only try it once but over and over, and they’ll probably try to entice you to drink.”

He smiled wickedly. “Now that sounds kind of fun, out-scheming the schemers. There’s no reason I shouldn’t enjoy myself along the way.”

“That sounds like a dangerous game, Ian. I don’t like it. I vote no making out with or toying with the opposition,” Margo said.

“And what fun would that be?” Ian said, before he turned to walk back inside.

**~The Real End**



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## About the Author

Author of your next binge-worthy romance series, Stella has been plotting sexy, tear-jerker stories since she was old enough to hold a pencil. Born a Georgia peach, Stella loves all things country but calls the beach home even though she's currently living outside D.C. with her family. Most days she can be found drinking too much coffee, collecting lipstick she forgets to wear, and baking.

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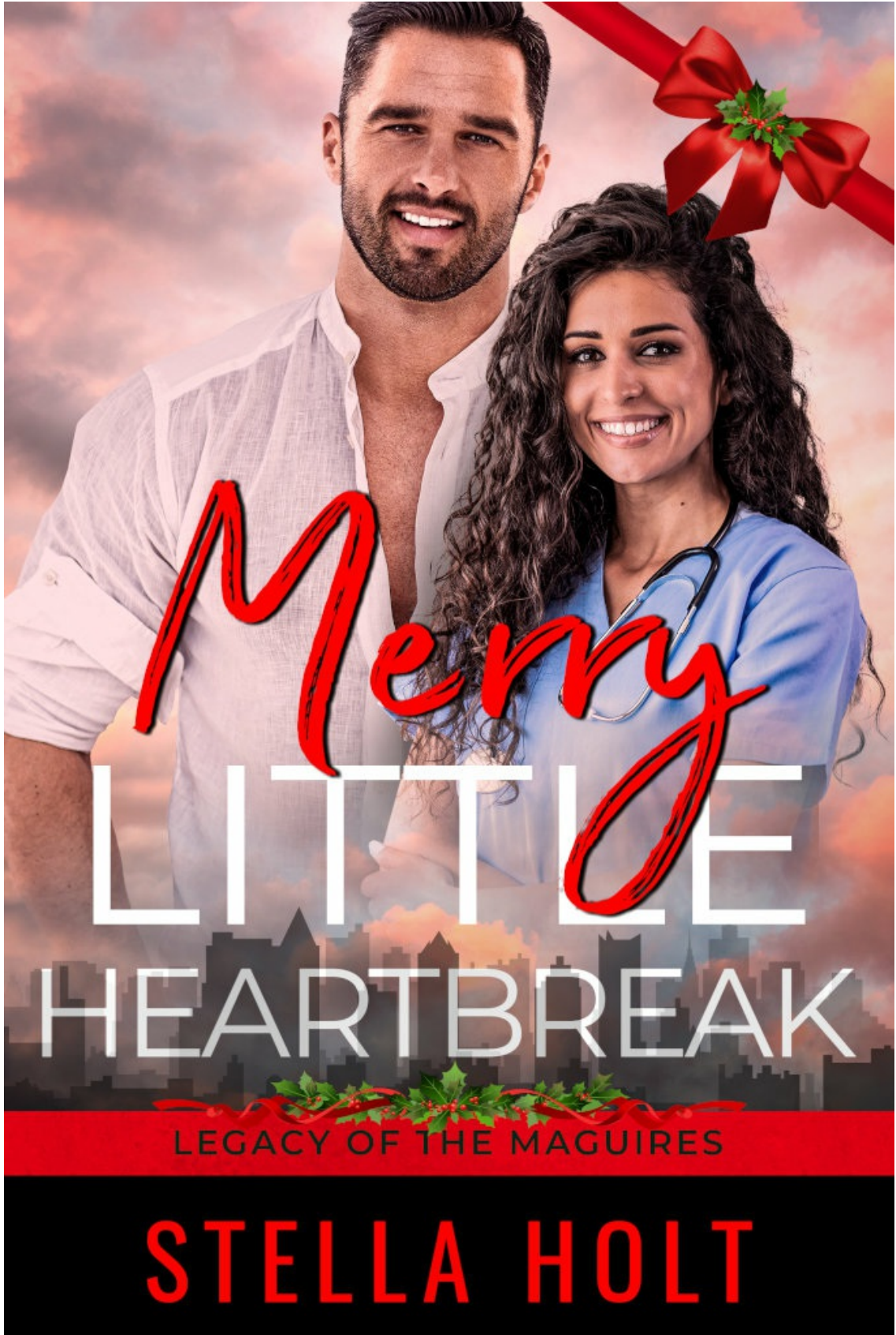
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